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# JOHN RUTLAND'S ROMANCE

A large, stylized, symmetrical decorative flourish in a reddish-brown color. It features a central heart shape from which multiple curved lines radiate outwards, forming a wide, wing-like or fan-like shape.

BY J. PERCIVAL BESSELL

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## **JOHN RUTLAND'S ROMANCE**



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Creek had not figured upon a witness to his carefully plotted crime.

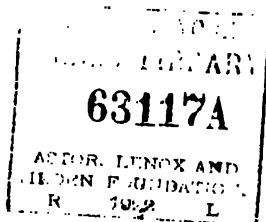
JOHN RUTLAND'S  
ROMANCE

BY  
J. PERCIVAL BESSELL  
Author of "Paid Out"

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# **JOHN RUTLAND'S ROMANCE**



# JOHN RUTLAND'S ROMANCE

## CHAPTER I

### THE PHOTO AND THE FACE

"I HOPE to goodness she won't be disappointed in me," said John Rutland to himself, as, with a degree of intensity and concern excusable only in one so young, he made a final survey of his reflection in the mirror. The result was a slight readjustment of his tie-pin and the removal of a microscopical speck of dust from his coat-collar. This achieved, his expression seemed to imply — though more from a hint of resignation than of self-satisfaction — that nothing further could be done to render his appearance as immaculate as the occasion demanded.

He had picked up his hat and gloves and a somewhat sportive-looking cane, when he paused for a moment to gaze with obvious rapture at the photograph of a young lady in a silver-mounted frame that stood upon the mantel-piece.

The photograph in question — which bore the name of a fashionable West-end Studio renowned for the artistic character of its work — revealed, in profile, a face of such exquisite charm and refinement that young Rutland's rapture seemed but a fitting and natural tribute to feminine charms.



## 10 JOHN RUTLAND'S ROMANCE

The clear-cut, perfectly-moulded features were of the type known as Grecian, and the slightly upward gaze of the eye — steadfast and yearning in its mute appeal — conveyed an impression of almost angelic beauty. At least, it was evident that John Rutland thought so.

“Upon my word,” he said to himself in an awed whisper, “she looks more like a seraph than a human being. Could anything be more beautiful? To think that I shall actually *know* her in little more than an hour’s time!”

Considering that he was already engaged to this ethereal young lady, the last remark would appear to call for some explanation. And perhaps the best method of supplying this will be the reproduction of a certain brief paragraph (not to say advertisement) which had chanced to catch young Rutland’s eye in a recent issue of a weekly paper:

Young lady, cultured, and of wide interests and sympathies, and whose soul yearns for a kindred spirit in whom she may repose her confidence and trust, would welcome correspondence with a young gentleman of education and refinement. Object, mutual uplifting and (if Fate should so ordain) the comradeship that results from the contact of two affinities. Apply &c.

Doubtless, it was destiny that had chanced to bring the foregoing confession of a maiden’s craving for a kindred spirit to John Rutland’s notice precisely at the moment when he himself felt the need of an uplifting and steadying influence. Indeed, with more than a strain of mysticism in his composition, he had frankly regarded the matter

in this light, and, being ever of a romantic and impulsive nature, he had sat down, there and then, and indited a long and warm-hearted response. This had evoked an equally cordial effusion from the "unknown," who, it appeared, was a Miss Florence Knotts of Ilford, London. John had been somewhat chagrined to discover that the young lady was at present stopping with friends at no less an outlandish and inaccessible spot than Ballyhoogan, on the West coast of Ireland, a circumstance which precluded the possibility of an immediate meeting. However, he derived a grain of comfort from the postscript which the young lady added to her letter, namely, that she would be pleased to exchange photographs.

The exchange having been duly effected, the impressionable young Rutland promptly succumbed to the seraphic beauty of his still — to all intents and purposes — unknown correspondent. Fired with a poetic fervour that carried everything before it, and fearing lest there should be other equally ardent suitors, he sent, by return of post, a truly fervid declaration of the love that had been kindled within his breast, and concluded his romantic epistle with a formal proposal of marriage.

Then had followed three days and nights of intense suspense, culminating in the receipt of a charming letter of acceptance which had sent the anxious and love-sick John Rutland into a state of delirious delight and ecstasy.

Now, although the foregoing may seem very foolish and, perhaps, incomprehensible, it must be borne in mind that Love ranks an easy "first" as a

force for inducing young people to act in a foolish manner; and, further, there were in this instance circumstances which rendered the course taken by the young man whose conduct is under consideration not so difficult to understand as might at first sight appear.

For the past twelve months, John Rutland, now twenty-two years of age, had been the lucky possessor of a private income. Under his late father's will, he had on attaining his majority become entitled to the interest on certain trust funds, which yielded him an annuity of One-hundred-and-fifty pounds, payable by monthly instalments of Twelve-pounds-ten-shillings. This very acceptable bequest, however, was subject to a somewhat curious and seemingly arbitrary condition that at once proclaimed the insular prejudices of the testator's mind. It was nothing less than an express direction to the trustees of the will that the annuity was only to be paid so long as his, the testator's, son remained resident in the United Kingdom. Even a temporary absence abroad was to involve suspension of payment, whilst in the event of such absence extending beyond a period of three calendar months the annuity was to lapse and the trust funds from which it was derived were to revert to the residuary estate.

Now, whatever the motives that had prompted the late Mr. Rutland to limit his son's career to the United Kingdom, John had often enough chafed at the restriction, since it had clashed with a craving he had long felt to seek his fortune in a distant land. But, as it appeared to be a choice of either

foregoing the aforesaid craving for a life abroad or abandoning his right to that comfortable competence under his father's will, he had, on the insistent advice of his numerous friends, elected to reconcile himself to the stipulated "residence in the United Kingdom."

The result, however, had not been altogether satisfactory from the point of view of John's general well-being. For, instead of wisely saving his private income and continuing to earn his living in the humdrum but steady-going position which he had held in the City up to the time of the attainment of his majority, he had thrown up his monotonous occupation and had sought to give vent to his restless disposition — so far as his resources permitted — in a life of pleasure and frivolity. It had, indeed, been only with the utmost difficulty that he had contrived to keep out of actual debt. Both his parents being dead, and having neither brother nor sister, he had lived alone in apartments — a couple of comfortably furnished rooms in a modest villa at East Finchley — and had thus been free to go his own way without let or hindrance.

But twelve months of this aimless life had sufficed to convince young Rutland — who was at heart far from being the shallow fellow some of his idle acquaintances may have supposed — that he was making a fool of himself. On a certain recent day, already alluded to as that on which destiny had brought to his notice that fateful advertisement, he had been smitten with a sense of sudden remorse. He had told himself that he was in a fair way of becoming a chronic loafer and no good to

anybody. Moreover — and this was a sure sign that he was made of better stuff than some of his associates — the long continued lack of occupation was becoming intolerable, and he much regretted that his desire to see life and have a good time had caused him to throw up that monotonous but steady-going situation in the City. It dawned upon him that his private income had, indeed, been more of a curse than a blessing to him, and so poignant had been his remorse on this sudden awakening of his better nature that he had actually had an impulse to run away from everything, private income and all, and start life afresh in a new country.

But Fate, in the person of Miss Florence Knotts, had intervened, and the romantic and impulsive John, instead of emigrating, had made love to the young lady whom as yet he had not seen, but whose photo he had worshipped the moment he had been privileged to set eyes upon it. Here, he told himself, was a charming and cultured young lady who would provide him with the necessary impetus to a better life, even amid his old surroundings; and with this thought the latent ambition of his nature to be and to do something better than his fellow-creatures had come to the surface.

For the next week or so the lovers had written to each other with that frequency and peculiar extravagance of expression with which young people, newly betrothed, usually seek to give vent to their feelings. In the course of this exchange of confidential communications it transpired, by a curious coincidence, that — like John Rutland — Miss

Knotts had a private income, though in her case it amounted to a fairly substantial figure. To do John justice, however, this circumstance in no way added to his gratification and happiness, nor did it cause him to lessen the efforts he was now making to secure a position. He regarded the young lady as the original source of the inspiration that had come to him to abandon his idle life and carve a way for himself in the world; and to have allowed the knowledge that she was possessed of some wealth to influence adversely his good resolutions would not have been consistent with his belief in that uplifting power which he fondly attributed to her.

Doubtless, the critical reader will ask why John, before committing himself to a definite engagement, did not adopt the wiser course of waiting until he had actually seen the young lady, instead of relying on the photographer's artistic representation. For photographs — particularly those taken in profile — are apt to be flattering, not to say misleading. But, as has already been stated, John's nature was essentially impulsive and romantic, and where you get these conditions, coupled with extreme youth and a blind belief in destiny, you may get anything.

These reasons had sufficed to precipitate John headlong into a definite offer of marriage rather than incur the risk of being thwarted by another equally ardent suitor.

And now, on the afternoon in question, he found himself at last face to face with the momentous prospect of stepping, as it were, from the land of dreams — and what dreams they had been! — into

the realm of reality. He could scarcely believe it.

Indeed, he was so pre-occupied as he made his way downstairs that he hardly noticed the demure, sweet-faced girl whom he passed on his way. Mechanically, he raised his hat and bade her "Good afternoon," but his thoughts were manifestly far away. And he was certainly quite unconscious a moment or so later that the same shy maiden was glancing coyly after him from behind a window curtain, as he passed down the little garden, and that a sigh of resignation marked his exit. This was Gladys Woodford, his landlady's pretty daughter, to whose gentle and modest charms John had somehow remained blind. That she cared for him, however, would have been obvious enough to a chance observer, had there been such this afternoon. Though she knew nothing of the circumstances of John's recent romance, she guessed intuitively that in all probability he was going to meet the beautiful girl at whose silver-framed photo she had more than once seen him cast such yearning glances, and a sense of sadness filled her as she turned away.

It had been arranged that the lovers should meet by the clock at Hyde Park Corner at 4 o'clock that afternoon. That there was any likelihood of a difficulty of identification had never occurred to John, but Miss Knotts, with admirable forethought, had suggested that as Hyde Park Corner was a much frequented spot at that hour of the day it was just conceivable that mutual embarrassment might be avoided if each of them carried in the left hand a letter. John had smiled indulgently at

this, to him, entirely superfluous precaution against the possibility of his mistaking anyone else for the object of his devoted affections, but he had, none the less, fallen in with the young lady's suggestion.

It was fully ten minutes before the appointed hour when John, his pulses throbbing with suppressed excitement, reached the place of assignation. As he glanced, half-shyly, half-eagerly, about him at the ever moving throng of people, he was conscious of a mingled sense of nervousness and elation. He felt that he would be glad when the embarrassment of the first exchange of greetings was over. He would take the dear girl, he told himself, to some quiet part of the Park where they could be alone for a while and get a bit used to each other — he smiled to himself at this thought — and, later, no doubt, she would wish to take him out to Ilford in order to introduce him to her parents. Indeed, she had said as much in her last letter.

But — and it was a very disquieting but — what if she were disappointed in him — disillusioned? Such a thing, after all, might easily happen, John reflected, and the thought sent a momentary wave of dejection and fear through him. For John, in spite of the fact that he was a good-looking enough young fellow, with a frank, honest face and a very engaging manner, was singularly lacking in any undue opinion of his personal charms. For an instant he was quite unnerved at the bare thought of the calamity the possibility of which had just struck him, and he actually withdrew a few paces



in order that he might pull himself together ere his fiancée arrived.

Then an idea occurred to him, and he wondered that it had not struck him sooner. He would endeavour to get a first peep at his loved one before he revealed himself to her — to gaze, if possible, unseen on the beautiful features which had haunted him day and night for the past two weeks, and see if he could read therein any sign or token which might prepare him for the worst, or, as he fondly hoped, give him fresh courage and inspiration. For John rather flattered himself on his ability to read faces, and it must be borne in mind that as yet he had only seen the exquisite profile of her in whose hands he now felt his fate rested.

Hastily replacing in his pocket the letter which, in accordance with the pre-arranged signal, he had been holding in his left hand, he took up a position immediately behind a little group of people who were standing by an iron railing at the big gateway to the Park. From this point of vantage he could see the precise spot where, at any moment, Miss Knotts might appear, with little likelihood of being himself seen by her.

He was in a veritable fever of excitement now as he scrutinised with breathless eagerness the features of every young lady within range of his vision. *She*, whom he knew, yet knew not, and who had become as the very breath of his life, was about to reveal herself to him in person. Such were John's feelings as he waited through those leaden moments. And all the time, at the back of his mind, was that newly-arisen, haunting dread lest she, the

dearest, fairest creature on earth, should be disappointed in him. Oh, that his first secret glimpse of her might bring him an intuitive conviction that his fears were groundless!

*There she was!*

There was no mistaking that exquisite profile of which he now had his first actual glimpse, and poor John's head was instantly in a whirl of excitement. A wild tumult of emotion swept over him, and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from rushing forward and greeting her. Was it possible, he asked himself, that so beautiful, so divine a creature could be destined to become his very own?

For a few moments he gazed on her in spell-bound admiration. She was fashionably, yet quietly, dressed, and in her daintily-gloved left hand she held a letter—that, to John, entirely superfluous confirmation of her identity. With secret satisfaction he noted her well-bred air of detachment from the common crowd, and that indefinable suggestion of delicacy and restraint which is the hall-mark of the perfect lady. Yet he fancied he could discern—and it gave him a strange thrill of pleasure to do so—beneath that demeanour of maidenly reserve a faint hint of the eagerness that surged within his own breast, a certain something that conveyed to him love's own sweet message, something that seemed to bid him hope that his cherished dreams were, indeed, destined to be realised.

Unable any longer to withhold his passionate yearning to greet his loved one, John was on the point of stepping forward, when suddenly the

young lady, changing her position slightly, turned in his direction. Though only a few feet separated them, she could not well see him, for he was still standing behind the little knot of people by the railing, but he saw her — saw her, for the first time, *face to face*.

John gasped.

His features, which had suddenly become strangely tense and drawn, blanched for an instant; then a deep, scarlet flush mantled his temples. Instead of stepping forward, he remained rooted to the spot where he stood, gazing in something like a horrible fascination on that face turned full towards him.

A groan of mingled anguish and humiliation escaped him.

For a few moments his fate, and that of the young lady whom he thus secretly observed, hung by a thread in the balance.

Then, abruptly and without a word, John Rutland turned on his heel and walked rapidly away, whilst the shadow of a deep despair stamped itself upon his youthful face.

## CHAPTER II

### FRED STORMONT

"It's no good, young man. If you think you won't be able to pay your rent another week you had better clear out to-day before you run into debt. I've 'ad enough already of young men who stop on and don't pay their rent, and I'm not a'going to be took in any more, not if I can 'elp it. Not but what you're better than most, for tellin' me straight out that you've come to the end of your tether, and I don't mind doing you the favour of taking charge of your trunk while you're lookin' around for a job. But I can't afford to run the risk of not gettin' my rent reg'lar, week by week."

The speaker was Mrs. Topling, the landlady of a lodging-house in a mean street off the Islington end of City Road. She was a middle-aged woman, and looked as though, in her efforts to eke out a living by letting lodgings, she had seen more than her share of the seamy side of life.

The young man whom she had thus addressed was Fred Stormont, the occupant of the small, barely-furnished "top-floor back." He had a frank, open face, and an air of well-bred refinement singularly at variance with his sordid surroundings.

The purport of Mrs. Topling's remarks may be better appreciated when it is stated that young Stormont, having just paid her the week's rent of

his room, had announced, with a candour that was characteristic of him, that he could not at the moment see where the next week's rent was to come from, and that unless Mrs. Topling was prepared to allow the matter to remain temporarily in abeyance, he thought he had better leave her there and then.

There had been no hint in his manner of the despair which was gnawing at his heart, but merely an obvious wish to treat fairly and honourably the landlady of whom he had rented his room for the past few months. And it was with a quiet, almost philosophical, air of resignation that he had accepted her view of the situation.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Topling," he said, sympathetically, "I quite understand how you look at the matter. I can't expect you to run any risks. I'll just pack up my things and leave them for the time being in your charge. And when I come to claim them," he added with a pleasant, if somewhat wan, smile, "I shall hope to be in a position to pay you another week's rent in lieu of the notice which I ought to have given you now."

A few minutes later Fred Stormont was in the street, with the sum of precisely one shilling and twopence in his pocket between him and absolute destitution. It was not a comfortable prospect, and there was an unwonted look of grimness on his almost boyish face as he turned into the busy City Road. He tried to derive some solace from the reflection that it was summer-time, and that the weather was fortunately so fine that a night or two in the open would be no great hardship. He had

no fixed idea as to what to do or where to go, and although he had a vague sort of determination to try to find work of some kind, he knew that his shabby, down-at-heel appearance rendered his chance of success a small one indeed.

Fred Stormont's life had not been a particularly happy one. He had no recollection of his father or mother, both of whom, he had been given to understand, died when he was an infant, and he had been brought up by an old nurse, a Miss Durnstone. The latter, though fulfilling her duties faithfully, was a taciturn creature, and Fred had gleaned little from her concerning his parents. Neither, so far as he knew, had he any relatives. Yet there had been some source from which money had come to pay for his keep and education, until at the early age of fourteen he had been transformed into an office-boy in the employ of a well-known firm of shipping merchants in the City. Then, under Miss Durnstone's direction, he had gone to reside with a respectable family at Walthamstow, and until his own earnings were sufficient his modest board and lodging expenses were provided for by Miss Durnstone, who, however, never disclosed the source from which the money came. When, through commendable industry and thrift, he was able to provide for himself, Miss Durnstone had gone out to friends in Winnipeg, Canada, and Fred did not hear from her again. It was often a tight squeeze for him to make both ends meet and there was little enough over for pocket-money, but Fred took things as they came with a philosophy that was unusual in one of his years, and devoted all his energies to

the attainment of a position of greater responsibility with his employers.

And he had seemed at last in a fair way to succeed, when, on a certain fateful day, a dire calamity befell him, wrecking all his cherished hopes at one cruel blow.

He found himself accused of the theft of some postal orders, of which he had had the handling, and in spite of his protestations of innocence he was summarily dismissed.

It is unnecessary to trouble the reader with details of this very unfortunate episode in young Stormont's career, but it may be said at once that he was entirely blameless in the matter.

"Don't you ever refer anyone to us for your character, Stormont," the senior partner of the firm had said sternly to Fred in dismissing him. He was a man of harsh and impetuous temper. "In spite of all you say to the contrary," he went on, "we take the view that *you* are the guilty culprit, and — well, we have done with you. You can go!" And, with an angry gesture, he had motioned Fred out of his presence.

Thus it had happened that Fred, after some seven years of unbroken service, had found himself out of work at a moment's notice, with the stigma of a baseless charge of theft upon him.

It was, indeed, a cruel and bitter blow, and one the very injustice of which might well have crushed the spirit of a young man of less grit and courage than Fred Stormont. But months of hardship and privation, of fruitless effort, relieved only by occasional odd jobs or temporary work of a kind for

which he was utterly unsuited, had bitten deep into his sensitive nature and reduced him at last to a condition bordering on sheer despair. And now, the quitting of his room at Mrs. Topling's lodging-house, little better than an attic though it had been, seemed like a climax to all his troubles.

He was homeless and friendless.

He spent his first night out on the Embankment — that last refuge of London's outcasts — snatching such slumber as the vigilance of the police would permit. With an eye for the morrow, he had feared to break into his last shilling for the price of a bed in a doss-house, and the hunger which assailed him when that morrow dawned made him glad of his choice. For the price of sixpence he regaled himself with a frugal breakfast at a coffee-stall, and as it was as yet too early to think of finding work he betook himself to one of the open spaces and there rested, in despondent thought.

Presently, when signs of the renewal of another day's activities became apparent in the streets, he began a series of more or less haphazard calls in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, in the hope of finding an odd job. After a number of unsuccessful ventures in this direction, his spirits were suddenly raised by an enquiry as to whether he would care to take a job at Ilford.

The man who asked him the question was the foreman of a wholesale fruit-merchant, and he added that his brother, Mr. William Venester, had just taken a large shop at Ilford, and was, he believed, in need of a porter.

"Mind you," he went on, "I can't say for cer-



tain that the job's still vacant, but I know it was yesterday. A good steady place it would be, too, for a hard-working young fellow." He eyed Fred up and down curiously for a moment, though not unkindly. "Ever taken a job as a porter?" he queried.

"I've had temporary work in that line," was Fred's answer, "and I don't mind what it is, so that I can find employment of some sort. If you will be kind enough to give me the address of your brother I shall be only too glad to call on him," he added gratefully.

The man wrote the name and address on a piece of paper and handed it to Fred. "You can tell him that his brother Frank sent you," he said. "And if you take the Ilford 'bus it will land you within a few minutes' walk of his shop."

Fred thanked the man and set off on his journey with a lighter heart than he had known for some days. In his anxiety to lose no time for fear of being forestalled, he cheerfully paid three-fourths of his remaining money on the necessary 'bus fare.

It was a day of glorious sunshine, and Fred's hopes rose perceptibly as he sped through the City and on towards his destination. Perhaps, after all, he told himself, the tide of his misfortunes was at last about to turn, and a modest beginning at Ilford might lead to better things.

When the long 'bus journey had ended he alighted and enquired his way to the address he had been given. In a few minutes, he found himself outside a large, flourishing-looking fruiterer's shop in a busy thoroughfare.

"If only the job is still vacant," was his reflection as he entered and enquired, with some trepidation, if he could see Mr. William Venester.

Mr. Venester came forward. He had a brusque air, and seemed in a hurry. "What is it, young man?" he asked bluntly.

Fred explained his errand, but almost before he had time to finish, Mr. Venester broke in with a curt intimation that the vacancy had just been filled.

There was again that look of grim despair on Fred's youthful face as he stood outside the shop. Somehow, he had felt a growing confidence as he had journeyed out to Ilford, that he was going to get this job. Of course, it would have been far from the sort of thing he had been accustomed to, but then it was obvious that his chance of stepping almost from the very gutter, as it were, into a decent clerical post was remote indeed, and he knew that the best he could hope for to start with must be a rough sort of job.

And here he was, stranded in Ilford, with precisely the sum of twopence in his pocket, and with no alternative but to tramp the seven or eight miles back to the City. He felt utterly wretched and dejected at the hopelessness of his outlook and the seeming futility of all his efforts to find work.

For a few minutes he walked aimlessly along the busy street. Then, acting on an impulse, he started on a series of calls at various shops in the faint hope that he might yet strike luck.

But the fates were against him, and although he persevered until well on into the afternoon he met

with no success. By now he was thoroughly weary, and finding himself on the outskirts of a pleasant park he went inside and sat down on a seat overlooking a peaceful little lake.

It seemed so quiet and restful there, after the turmoil and bustle of the sun-baked streets, that Fred presently fell into a light sleep.

The sound of voices near by roused him. Even in his half-awake condition, it struck him that one of the voices was unusually soft and melodious. He turned his head, which had hitherto been averted from the speakers, and observed that a couple of ladies had sat down at the further end of the seat. The speaker whose voice had arrested his attention was quite young, and he noticed — though his glance was directed towards her only for a moment — that she had an exquisite profile, of the delicate Grecian type. So striking was it, indeed, that for an instant he gazed in silent admiration at its faultless beauty.

“What a face!” he thought to himself, in spite of his pre-occupation and misery, as he rose wearily from the seat.

And, somehow, on the long tramp back to the City, that beautiful face, with its perfectly moulded profile, seemed to haunt him, and to intensify in a curious way his painful consciousness of failure and utter hopelessness.

That evening Fred spent his last twopence at a coffee-stall. It did not go far toward appeasing his hunger, but it served to stay the worst pangs, and this was not his first experience of going on short rations. What he missed most was the com-

fort of bed and shelter, the more so as the night had turned in wet and dreary. For this reason he shrank from the thought of sleeping again on the Embankment, and instead wandered around, wearily enough, in search of some quiet doorway or passage where there would be at least some protection from the rain. For Fred was too proud and sensitive to think of begging for the few coppers that would have secured him a bed in a cheap doss-house.

At length, in a deserted cul-de-sac in the neighbourhood of Seven Dials, he found a sheltered spot, and there, utterly wretched and worn out, he sank down and curled himself up, with only the hope that he might be left undisturbed. And soon, through sheer exhaustion, he fell asleep.

But physical discomfort rendered his sleep less sound than it might otherwise have been, and through his troubled slumbers there floated ever the haunting vision of a profile of exquisite charm. He seemed to be striving continually to get into a position which would enable him to command a full view of the face that had cast so strange a spell over him, and there was something almost in the nature of a nightmare in the tantalising futility of all his efforts to carry out this simple manoeuvre. Just as he seemed, at last, to be on the point of achieving his purpose he became conscious of a rough hand shaking him by the shoulder and a stern voice telling him to "get out of it." The flash of a policeman's lantern met his gaze as he opened his eyes.

"Come on, you must get out of this, I say," said

that zealous officer, though not without a hint of gruff compassion in his voice.

Fred, stiff and sore, struggled to his feet without a word, and shambled off. As he made his way through the deserted purlieus of Seven Dials the clock of St. Giles' Church struck two, and a grain of comfort came to him from the thought that it needed but another hour for dawn.

Presently, he found himself on the Embankment, where, at intervals upon the seats, a few dark huddled forms gave mute evidence of others as desolate and homeless as himself. A slight mist was still falling, blurring the long string of lights that marked the line of the Embankment, whereon a brooding stillness seemed now to rest.

Fred, grim and haggard, leant over the low stone parapet and looked down upon the swift-flowing river. There was a certain horrible fascination in those dark, silent waters, speeding ever sea-wards, and for an instant, in the extremity of his misery and desolation, he felt an impulse that made him shudder — an impulse to end all, there and then, by one reckless plunge.

With an effort he turned away, half-fearing to look down into those mysterious depths that seemed to lure him to his own destruction. "Let's see what the coming day has in store," he muttered to himself. "Perhaps something may yet turn up."

But he little guessed, as he caught sight of the first faint gleam of dawn, how much, indeed, that day had in store for him, or how completely it was destined to alter the whole course of his life.

Towards five o'clock on the afternoon of that day

Fred found himself in Hyde Park. Save for a bit of luck which had enabled him to earn his breakfast, he had met with no more success than on the previous day, and consequently he was, if possible, in a state of yet deeper dejection. Everything seemed to be dead against him, and once again he found himself faced with the prospect of spending a night in the open.

"I think I must contrive to give that Embankment a wide berth," he said to himself with a grim smile. "There's something too horribly luring in that river when a chap is so utterly down in the gutter as I am. . . . My word, but I'm absolutely ravenous! What wouldn't I give—if I had anything to give—for a good square meal and the knowledge that there was a comfortable bed to sleep in to-night. Ugh"—with a shudder—"I guess I've just about reached the end of my tether, with a vengeance. How little I ever imagined I should come to this."

He was thinking thus when he presently came to a seat in a quiet part of the park, and being by now thoroughly worn out he sank wearily down, thankful that at least he could rest awhile. There was another occupant of the seat, a well-dressed young fellow, whose attitude, curiously enough, in spite of a generally prosperous appearance, suggested a despair that might almost have equalled Fred's. For he sat there motionless, with his face buried in his hands. But Fred's observation of this circumstance was purely casual, his one thought being to snatch a little sleep while he could do so without the fear of disturbance.

And in a very few minutes he was as oblivious of all his hardships and disappointments as he was of the sudden interest with which the other occupant of the seat was now regarding him.

Into that young man's face had come an expression of mingled perplexity and amazement.

## CHAPTER III

### THE HAND OF FATE

WHEN John Rutland, instead of keeping his appointment with his fiancée, had turned away with such dramatic abruptness, his dominant impulse had been to be alone. To one of his sensitive and romantic temperament the shock which he had just sustained had brought with it an overwhelming sense of humiliation and despair. His whole mental outlook seemed to have been suddenly thrown out of balance, and his craving for solitude was only an instinctive effort to recover his equilibrium. He wanted to think, to strive to grasp the full significance of that before which his brain, for the moment, reeled in hopeless confusion.

For a while he wandered aimlessly about the quieter stretches of the park, until chancing to come upon a seat in a secluded part, and pleasantly screened by a cluster of bushes, he sank down and buried his face in his hands as though to shut out the appalling prospect which had suddenly presented itself to him.

"Good heavens—" he muttered to himself, "that it should have turned out like this! What an awful fool I was to get engaged to the girl without first seeing her. And yet—" with something like a shudder—"who would ever have guessed from



that photo, with its beautiful profile, that the full face would be so — so utterly disappointing. What a ghastly take in! And to think that I have all the time been regarding her as my uplifting influence — my source of inspiration!"

John Rutland gave vent to a groan of sheer anguish as he thought of all the uplifting and ennobling attributes he had fondly associated with his fiancée, and again a sense of humiliation swept over him. And, through it all, the undeniable fact that he was engaged to be married to this girl, in whose appearance he was so bitterly disappointed, beat itself remorselessly into his brain. What on earth, he asked himself, was he to do?

As he recalled again the impression which his first full view of those features had conveyed he could only declaim once more against his egregious folly in having entered into a definite engagement on the strength merely of a photograph. For in that one full glimpse, John — ever quick to receive impressions — had realised that he had been living in a fool's paradise, and that the love which had seemed to him as a tower of strength had proved itself but a fabric of cards which a puff of wind had scattered.

For instead of beholding, as he had fondly expected, a face of extraordinary beauty and ethereal charm, he had, when the young lady's face had been turned towards him, seen only features that were quite commonplace; worse still, instead of the soulful gaze which had seemed to belong so naturally to that enshrined photograph he had been little short of horrified to find himself regarding a pair of eyes

in which there was at least the suspicion of a squint. At all events, the defect had been sufficiently pronounced to impart, as it seemed to him, a somewhat sinister expression to the eyes, utterly at variance with his preconceived picture of the young lady of his choice.

"It's no good," he muttered to himself desperately. "I could never marry *that*. I know it's cowardly and unmanly of me, but I simply couldn't do it."

Then it occurred to him that his refusal to carry out his part of the matrimonial contract would be extremely likely to involve him in an action for breach of promise, with all the galling humiliation incidental to having his folly aired before a court of law and reported with nauseating detail in the papers. This was a prospect from which John's sensitive nature shrank in sheer dismay. Yet the momentary glimpse he had had of those somewhat cold, hard features left little doubt in his mind as to their owner's capacity for a vindictive determination to be avenged. And what better means could she employ for this purpose — particularly in the case of a young man with a private income — than by dragging him before the Courts and there exposing him for his flagrant perfidy?

"Good lord!" he said to himself, "I could never face that. No, I must leave the country, that's all about it. Even if I did remain here now, after this utter take in, I should only fall back into my former idle, aimless life and become in the end a confirmed loafer and waster. My only chance is to go abroad and start life afresh in a new country,

away from my old surroundings. I have been bitterly deceived — through my own rashness, I admit — and I feel as though the deception had robbed me of my principal source of strength."

Then he remembered that unfortunate stipulation in his father's will relative to his residence in the United Kingdom, the breach of which would involve the forfeiture of his annuity.

John ground his teeth in impotent vexation, but to do him justice he was less perturbed at the prospect of losing his private income than by a sense of his own unworthiness in the course which he felt compelled to adopt, namely, the breaking off of his engagement. He told himself that it was obviously possible that the young lady, in spite of what he deemed to be a repellent appearance, might yet have a very staunch and loving heart. There was no denying she had written him the most charming and affectionate letters, and it was not improbable that her first feeling when she realised the extent to which *she* had been deceived would be one of acute suffering, whatever the measures she might subsequently take to obtain redress. And the more he thought of the matter in this light, the more did that sense of his own unworthiness obtrude itself.

So engrossed was he in his thoughts, as he vainly strove to grapple with his dilemma, that he did not notice the forlorn and shabby-looking young man, who presently sank wearily upon the same seat. It was not until some minutes later that he chanced to glance round at the newcomer, whose weariness was such that he had already fallen asleep.

The half-mechanical and entirely casual glance which John had directed towards the stranger changed suddenly to one of interest, and finally to one of perplexity and astonishment. Indeed, in spite of his pre-occupation, he seemed scarcely able to take his eyes off this somewhat pitiful specimen of a human derelict.

"Upon my word," he muttered to himself in a mystified undertone, after a prolonged and careful scrutiny, "it's really very extraordinary. Most extraordinary! Why, dash it all, if it weren't for the difference in our clothes we should be taken for twin brothers — with an amazing resemblance at that, too . . . I wonder who the poor beggar is?"

The resemblance in face and figure was, indeed, remarkable. True, the newcomer looked somewhat pale and emaciated, but even this difference was less apparent than it might have been, for until recently John had been "going the pace" a bit, and late hours and a certain amount of dissipation still left their mark upon his youthful features.

"Well, well, this beats everything," he went on to himself, his eyes still riveted upon the stranger. "They say that everyone has a double, but I never expected to meet mine, if, indeed, I ever believed that I had one. . . . But" — with a half-pitying glance at the threadbare, shabby clothes of the slumberer — "how wretched and miserable the poor chap looks. I've a jolly good mind to try and slip half-a-crown in his pocket. He looks to be sound enough asleep for anything. How he would rub his eyes when he presently discovered it!"

John hesitated for a moment as he felt in his

pocket for the coin. "No, I won't do that," he added on an after-thought. "Perhaps I can help him in a better way than that. Let's wait a bit till he wakes."

But so protracted, as well as profound, was the stranger's slumber that, long ere there was any indication of a return to consciousness, John's thoughts had reverted to his own troubles again. The recollection of his dilemma came to him as a hideous nightmare, and once more he found himself bemoaning his ill-timed ardour in wooing a maid whom he had never seen, and vainly racking his brains for some means of escape from the odious consequences of his folly.

Suddenly, he started up as though electrified, and turned with a curious eagerness towards that inert, half-huddled figure at the other end of the seat. There was something more than interest in his gaze now, something that suggested a definite purpose.

"I wonder if it *would* be possible?" he muttered to himself. "Good heavens, what a chance it seems! Upon my word, I believe the hand of Fate is in this."

John, as we have seen, was a young man of impulse, and so great now was his eagerness to carry out the plan that had suddenly occurred to him that he could wait no longer for the natural return to consciousness of the stranger in whom he had become so interested. Yet he showed some *finesse* in achieving his purpose, for he had a reason for not appearing to awaken him deliberately. He wanted to satisfy himself, in the course of a seem-

ingly casual conversation, that this young man, who assuredly was outwardly his very double, was not a mere vagabond whom it would be impossible to trust.

With this object in view, he sidled a little way along the seat and placed his cane in such a position that it slid, or fell, against the sleeper. It was only a light touch and might well have passed unnoticed, but it had the desired effect.

The young man started abruptly, opened his eyes, and for a moment looked about him with that appearance of bewilderment peculiar to people who are suddenly aroused from sleep. Then he caught sight of the fallen cane and of John bending forward to pick it up.

"I'm awfully sorry," said the latter with well-feigned innocence, "I'm afraid I woke you up."

"It's all right," replied the stranger, with a somewhat wan smile. "I think I must have had quite a long sleep. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me the time?"

John glanced down at the neat little watch which he wore on his wrist. "It's nearly six o'clock," he said looking up.

Then, quite naturally, the eyes of the two young men met for the first time.

For a few moments they regarded each other in silent astonishment, an astonishment which, on one side, was quite admirably assumed. John noted with secret satisfaction that the resemblance which he had first observed was not one whit diminished by a closer view of his "double." It was also apparent to him that that young man was as much

perplexed as he was himself at the resemblance. It was John who broke a silence that appeared to be growing mutually embarrassing.

"Excuse my rudeness in staring at you in this fashion," he said with a smile of apology, "but I can't help being struck by — er — by your very curious likeness to myself. Upon my word, it's very remarkable. I daresay you see it for yourself?"

"I do, indeed. It really is very odd."

Something in the quiet, well-modulated tone in which the words were spoken, together with a certain air of reserve, impressed John favourably. It was clear that this was a fellow who had belonged to a different station in life to that in which he was now placed. Moreover, there was a straight, honest look in those dark hazel eyes, as they returned John's gaze, that went far towards convincing the latter that his "double's" present plight must be due to misfortune rather than to his own wrong-doing.

Again they eyed each other with critical interest.

"I suppose," said John as though struck by a sudden idea, "we can't by any chance be related to each other? My name is Rutland — John Rutland."

"And mine is Stormont — Fred Stormont. I have no relatives that I know of. At all events, I have never heard of any. So our resemblance is no doubt merely a coincidence."

With considerable tact and delicacy, John now induced Stormont to talk about himself — not altogether an easy matter, for the latter was somewhat

shy about discussing his misfortunes with strangers — and soon elicited sufficient information for his purpose. He had no longer any doubt in his mind that the hand of Fate was, indeed, in this strange encounter between himself and one who resembled him so closely, and a fixed determination seized him to avail himself of the chance thus thrown across his path. It was only with difficulty that he checked an impulse to rush to the point with an eagerness that might have defeated his purpose.

"I'm really very sorry for you," he said, speaking with unusual deliberation. "Your position is certainly a very unfortunate one. And yet —" he paused, and something of his former look of despair came into his face again. There was a hint of desperation in his tone as he went on. "I daresay you will scarcely believe it, but — I only wish I were in your shoes instead of my own."

Fred Stormont's face expressed the incredulity with which he received this astounding remark, as his eyes ran over the well-clothed and generally prosperous-looking speaker.

"No, no," added John, as though he read the other's thoughts, "I don't mean that I am penniless in spite of my good clothes. On the contrary, I have a private income which is at least sufficient for my requirements. But — *I envy you your freedom.*"

"My freedom!" Fred smiled rather grimly as he said this. "But surely," he added, with some astonishment, "you are every bit as free as I am? I'm afraid I don't quite understand."



"Perhaps it does seem strange to you," said John, "but I'll tell you what I mean. You have been telling me of your unfortunate — your desperate position. With you, if I may put it frankly, it's a case of lack of money. With me — well, money, since I came of age, has been more or less of a curse. Not that I mean I have such a lot of it, but just enough for it to demoralise me. I wanted to go abroad, but was prevented by the terms of my father's will under which I derive my income. That income amounts to £150 a year, which I draw from my solicitors in monthly instalments. To go abroad would mean sacrificing my income. Consequently, like a fool, as I now realise, I have been living a life of idleness and even — to some extent — dissipation.

"Well, about a fortnight ago I fell violently in love with the photo of a girl whom I had never seen but with whom I had entered into correspondence through an advertisement. It was a very beautiful photo, and it seemed to inspire me to better things. And being, I suppose, of a romantic nature, I there and then wrote to her with an offer of marriage. She accepted. She was spending a holiday with friends in Ireland at the time, so we were unable to meet, but we wrote to each other every day.

"Then she returned to London, and this afternoon we were to have met. The appointment was for four o'clock at Hyde Park Corner.

"Well, I duly turned up, and awaited the young lady's arrival. An impulse prompted me to take up a position from which I could obtain a first peep at her before disclosing myself. You see, it was

rather an embarrassing situation. For although we were formally engaged we had never met, though each had a photo of the other. For this reason I was curious to get that first peep. And I got it."

For the first time since he had begun the disclosure of his position John hesitated. For a moment he seemed at a loss as to how to proceed. Then with a hint of grim desperation he resumed.

"Perhaps you can guess what the result was," he said, with a quick glance at his companion. "I was disappointed — *very* disappointed. And, acting again on an impulse, I turned on my heel and walked away. No doubt it was a contemptible thing on my part to do, but I felt, even from that brief glimpse, that the girl to whom I had become engaged in such a romantic fashion would not, in reality, prove the source of inspiration I had imagined."

This was putting it rather mildly, as John well knew, and for which in some measure he despised himself, yet he felt that the end he had in view justified him. He feared that if he drew too vivid a picture of his disappointment and mortification he might defeat his own purpose.

Fred Stormont looked up with an expression of frank astonishment on his face when John had finished speaking. "But surely," he said, "you don't mean that you're going to throw the young lady up just because she didn't come up to your expectations from that first peep?" There was almost a hint of contempt in Stormont's voice as he put the question.

"I don't know what to do," was the answer. "I

hate to act dishonourably, and yet I feel instinctively — yes, even from that brief glimpse — that I — well, that my choice of a fiancée was an unfortunate one. And to one of my temperament," added John in tones of despair, "that presents an appalling prospect."

He looked with almost tragic intensity at the young man who bore so strange a resemblance to himself. For a few moments there was silence.

It was in that brief space of silence that John resolved to shoot his bolt.

"Good heavens, what an idea!" he exclaimed suddenly, as though it had only just occurred to him. "I wonder if it would be possible? Look here," he went on excitedly, "don't imagine that I've taken leave of my senses, but — how would you like to change places with me — you become John Rutland, with my private income, my fiancée,— and I become Fred Stormont, free to go my own way in the world without the incubus of being tied to a girl whom I know I could never love?" And the gesture of eagerness with which he turned towards Stormont gave an added force to his words.

So great was John's excitement, and so complete was the astonishment of the young man whom he had thus addressed, that neither of them noticed the slight rustling in the bushes just behind, nor observed a certain stealthy movement as of someone drawing a little closer to the seat on which this curious conversation was taking place.

"You — you can't possibly mean it," ejaculated Stormont in a tone of blank amazement. "Why, it's —"

"I do mean it, indeed. I was never more serious in my life. I tell you, whether you fall in with my suggestion or not, the chances are that, rather than marry that girl, I shall emigrate and begin life anew in the Colonies. And, mind you, that means that I've got to give up my annuity, anyway. The thing that weighs most on my mind is my obligation to the girl. Not that she would suffer in a monetary sense, for she has considerable private means of her own. But, to shirk the fulfilment of my promise of marriage would remain in my mind as a lasting reflection on my sense of honour. Yet, if it were possible for someone to step into my shoes and fulfil that obligation for me—and it doesn't follow that the girl that would not suit me might not suit him—my conscience would be clear. And you—with your extraordinary resemblance to myself—. Why, the more I think of it the more I feel that it wasn't mere chance that brought us together this afternoon."

"But to me," said Stormont, speaking almost sadly, "with my knowledge of poverty and hardship, it seems incredible that you can seriously wish to sacrifice your comfortable life and private income, break your engagement to a girl who also has means, and take your chance as an emigrant abroad, simply because from a first hasty glimpse of her she doesn't come up to your expectations."

"That is because you don't know me—because you don't understand my nature. Let me explain to you all the circumstances that led up to my present dilemma and what the reasons were that induced me to form this—as I now regard it—

deplorable attachment. Then, perhaps, you will not wonder at my wishing to change places with you."

And, without more ado, John launched forth into a sufficiently detailed account of his recent life, dwelling especially upon that sudden access of remorse at his idle and dissipated habits which had caused him to regard his chance observation of a certain advertisement (which he quoted word for word) as a direct interposition of Fate, and how, when he had received the photo of the young lady in question, he had felt convinced that she was, indeed, destined to prove the source of inspiration that was to raise him to a better and a nobler life.

"Now," he concluded, "you can perhaps understand how it was, when I suddenly realised that I had been living in a fool's paradise and that the girl did not appeal to me in the way I had imagined, that I regretted — bitterly regretted — having become engaged to her. And it is because I feel my position so acutely that I offer, in all seriousness, to change places with you. It is true that you would be accepting responsibility for an engagement which might possibly prove distasteful to you, but on the other hand it might not. What fails to appeal to me might appeal to you. I tell you, this is a chance of a lifetime for you."

It was certainly a curious position. The well-dressed, prosperous-looking young man of independent means eagerly endeavouring to persuade his shabby, down-at-heel companion to change places with him, to step from his environment of

hardship and want into one of comfort and comparative affluence. Yet, however extraordinary the proposal might appear, there could be no doubt as to the sincerity of him who made it, and it left Fred Stormont in a state of mingled bewilderment and amazement.

For some moments he remained silent after John had finished speaking.

"I scarcely know what to — to think about it," he finally stammered. "But one thing that strikes me is this: suppose I do step into your shoes, as you propose, and the deception is presently discovered, what then? Wouldn't that be rather awkward for me?"

"I don't think that would ever happen, but in case it should I will give you a letter stating explicitly that you are taking my place at my own wish, and that I voluntarily relinquish all claim to my annuity as my one desire is to start life afresh in the Colonies — a course which involves, in any case, the forfeiture of such annuity; and I will explain briefly that I avail myself of our accidental resemblance in the hope that you will fulfil the engagement I have entered into and which I desire to break. As I say, I don't for a moment think the need would ever arise, but if it did that letter would be sufficient to vindicate your part in the transaction."

"But," said Stormont, who, in spite of his poverty, seemed less keen on effecting the desired exchange of identities than might have been expected, "I am not at all sure of the feasibility of your proposal. You see, I am, of course, quite ignorant of

your past history and should be wholly in the dark at every point."

"We could easily get over that difficulty, I think," was the ready response. "In the first place, the difficulty would not be as great as you imagine, for the simple reason that for several months past I have kept a diary, and on other points I could enlighten you sufficiently for all practical purposes. Further, both my parents are dead, I have neither brother nor sister, and such relatives as I have are scattered and take little enough interest in me. And as far as my fiancée, Miss Knotts, is concerned, I have, of course, kept all her letters, and in some instances have copies of my replies, so that a perusal of the correspondence would place you tolerably *au fait* in that direction. You would merely have to write with a plausible explanation of your inability to keep to-day's appointment, express your regret, and make another appointment."

"But how about the handwriting?" queried Stormont, whose appreciation of possible difficulties was certainly in striking contrast to John's airy way of meeting them.

"I don't think that need worry you," said the latter, after a moment's reflection. "My writing, after all, is of a very ordinary character, and with a little practice you should be able to imitate it well enough. In the first instance, you might, if necessary, confine yourself to a telegram. That, when you come to think of it," he added with a smile, "would seem a very natural thing to do."

"It would be certainly safer to begin with."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said John after a pause. "We can't discuss everything here, so if it's agreeable to you, I'll take you out to my 'digs' at East Finchley to-night, at an hour when I know there will be little chance of our encountering anyone there, and we'll go into everything thoroughly. Moreover, you will be able to see the young lady's photo for yourself, and if you agree to my proposal — as I think you will — we will effect the exchange right away. I will leave you in possession as John Rutland, and will come away in your clothes but with just sufficient money to pay my steerage passage to Canada. Now, what do you say to that?"

John was quite carried away with his enthusiasm.

"I admit it seems a tempting prospect for me," said Stormont with more eagerness than he had yet shown. "But I can't get away from the feeling that if I do as you wish I shall be taking advantage of you."

"On the contrary. You will be doing me the best turn imaginable. It's that engagement that worries me, and if you agree to take my place I shall feel that the responsibility now rests with you, and my conscience will be clear. To escape that engagement I've got to sacrifice my annuity, anyway; and in exchange for your acceptance of my responsibility you get the benefit of that annuity. That's just what it amounts to.

"But, don't let's talk about it any more here. The first thing to do is to get something to eat. Come and have a good square meal, and then we'll loaf around until it's safe to get up to my 'digs.'



They turn in pretty early there as a rule."

The immediate prospect of at least a good square meal was well nigh irresistible to the hungry out-cast, and he assented with an alacrity that was peculiarly pleasing to John.

They had started to walk briskly in the direction of the Marble Arch when a tall, red-headed young man, with near-set, shifty eyes that seemed almost to scintillate with mingled greed and cunning, crept stealthily out from the bushes immediately behind the seat which they had just vacated. For a few moments he watched the two retreating figures.

"Safe enough now," he muttered to himself as he started to follow them. "I'm on this job. What a slice of luck! Fred Stormont and John Rutland, eh? I've got the names pat enough, anyway. What it is to have a good memory as well as keen ears for my line of business! Of course, it goes without saying that that fellow Stormont was only swanking when he pretended to hesitate about agreeing to the exchange. How he must be chuckling to himself already at the chance. *Wait till I appear on the scene!*"

An ugly smile twisted his thin, compressed lips as — still at a safe distance — he dogged the steps of the two unsuspecting young men.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE NEW JOHN RUTLAND

"YOUR shaving-water, sir. It's just 8 o'clock."

Fred Stormont woke with something of a start in response to the light knock at his door. For a moment he looked about him in bewilderment. Then it all came back to him, and he suddenly remembered that he was Fred Stormont, the penniless outcast, no longer, but John Rutland, a young man of independent means, and engaged to a charming and beautiful young lady.

Even now he could scarcely realize the extraordinary change that had taken place overnight in his life and outlook, and he was half-tempted to believe he must be the victim of some weird and tantalising hallucination. Yet, here he was, sure enough, just aroused from a refreshing sleep in the most comfortable of beds — the luxury of which he appreciated all the more for his recent hardships — and that polite intimation of the advent of shaving-water still ringing in his ears.

As though to convince himself of the reality of his position, he turned his gaze, with sudden eagerness, to a certain photo, which, be it confessed, was last in his thoughts when he had sunk into that blissful slumber.

There it was, enshrined in a neat silver-mounted frame — the photo of the very girl whom he had

chanced to see but two days since in the park at Ilford, and whose appearance had impressed him so strangely in that hour of mental anguish and suffering. He had recognised the photo instantly, and had greatly surprised John by the announcement that he had himself caught a glimpse of the original.

It had, indeed, been this curious coincidence that had removed any lingering hesitancy he felt about agreeing to the proposed exchange of identities. For something had seemed to tell him, in a flash, as it were, that the mysterious hand of destiny was at work in thus placing within his reach the very girl whose beautiful features had so haunted him on the long, weary tramp back to London; and that it was, after all, destiny that had sent him to Ilford in his vain quest of work. He had little fear that a disappointment similar to John's would also be his, for he was quite convinced in his own mind that that young man had been altogether too hasty in his judgment from the very brief glimpse he had caught of his lover's full face.

As he leisurely dressed and shaved himself, the new John Rutland — by which name he must henceforth be known to the reader of this story, since Fred Stormont, as such, has now passed from its pages — the new John Rutland refreshed his memory as to the final instructions his "double" had given him ere they parted. These had been tolerably clear and explicit, and though he naturally felt some trepidation at the prospect of his first plunge into the new world thus opened to him, he had little doubt of his ability to play the rôle which he

had assumed. That there might at times be awkward moments was probable enough, but there was the reassuring reflection that in case of need he could easily move to a part of London where the original John Rutland was unknown and thus save himself the embarrassment of encounters with people whom he was supposed to know yet knew not.

Doubtless, too, a careful perusal of that diary to which his "double" had referred would afford him valuable assistance in sustaining his part.

It was with quite unusual interest that he surveyed himself in the mirror when he had completed his toilet. Carefully shaved, and attired now exactly as the original John Rutland had been, his resemblance to that young man was naturally rendered the more remarkable and complete.

"I really think I shall do all right now," he said to himself with a smile of mingled amusement and satisfaction, "but I must keep my wits about me in case of any little mistakes. Let's see. The landlady's name is Woodford. It won't do to forget that for a start! . . . And now for the luxury of a good breakfast. By Jove, what a contrast to yesterday!"

He descended, with perfect assurance, to the room immediately below the bedroom, a bright, comfortably furnished apartment with a pleasant, almost rural outlook. Some of the breakfast things were already laid, and on the table was a letter in a lady's handwriting. It bore the Ilford postmark.

The new John Rutland opened it eagerly, with

a curious realisation of the rôle he had just assumed. This, he told himself, was *his* fiancée now.

"My own darling," it began, at which expression of endearment the reader of the letter smiled delightedly.

"Whatever can be the matter? I was so bitterly disappointed at not seeing you this afternoon, and am consumed now with anxiety, fearing you must be ill. I waited for you until six o'clock — and then came home with a heart of lead. My only hope was that I should find a letter or telegram awaiting me that would explain matters, but, alas, there was nothing, and my dread lest something serious should have happened to you was intensified. Forgive this very brief note, my darling boy, but I am too worried and upset to write at greater length to-night. If, for any reason, a letter isn't already on its way to me, I beg you will send me a telegram in the morning. And especially tell me if you are ill. My suspense is almost unbearable. Ever thy devoted and loving Flo."

"Upon my word," exclaimed the new John Rutland to himself, "she's a stunning good sort, anyway. Waited two solid hours, eh? And not a word of reproach! No hint of a suspicion that perhaps her lover may be fickle. Only a loving solicitude that he may be ill. What on earth can have induced that chap to throw her up on such a brief glimpse? I can only suppose his attachment must have been a mere caprice of the moment, and that his real craving was for a life abroad."

At the sound of an approaching step and the clatter of crockery he thrust the letter in his pocket

and picked up the morning paper which lay conveniently to hand.

"Come in," he called out cheerily, in answer to a knock at the door.

A tall, thin, middle-aged lady, with features suggestive of perpetual worry, entered the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Rutland," she said wearily as she set the tray down.

"Good morning, Mrs. Woodford. How are you this morning?"

"Oh, thank you, sir," said that lady, with an air of mild surprise, as though it were somewhat unusual for her lodger to make any enquiry after her state of health, "I'm only middling this morning. It's the lumbago, you know."

"Sorry to hear that," said John sympathetically. "Do you often suffer in that way?" Standing comfortably on the hearthrug with the opened newspaper in his hand, he was beginning to feel quite at his ease already in his new position. The next moment, however, his confidence received a slight check.

This time it was an expression of pained surprise that crossed Mrs. Woodford's anxious features. "Do I often suffer in that way?" she repeated, as with scrupulous care she adjusted the dish of eggs and bacon in its proper place and removed with her apron a speck of dust from the lid of the tea-pot. "Am I ever free from it I should like to know? Why—but there, it just shows, if I may make bold to say so, how little interest you young men of the present day take in the sufferings of your elders, and how quickly you forget."

She sighed sadly as she withdrew, and John caught the faintly murmured repetition of his unfortunate question, "Do I often suffer that way? Ah me!"

"Put my foot into it that time," he said to himself with a wry smile. "Just shows how much I am in the dark, after all. I expect the dear old soul is a chronic sufferer from lumbago. Moral: don't ask unnecessary questions until you're sure of your ground."

But this trifling set-back in no way marred John's keen enjoyment of his breakfast, an enjoyment born of his recent privations. "I hope to goodness my 'double' had a healthy appetite," he said to himself when he had devoured the eggs and bacon, followed by several rounds of bread and butter and marmalade, "or my good landlady will be wondering if he's suddenly got a wolf inside him. Jingo, what a ripping breakfast! Now for a pipe of 'baccy' while I take stock of my position generally, and consider as to the best course to pursue with regard to my failure to keep that very important appointment yesterday afternoon with Miss — er — Miss Knotts. Gad, I'd almost forgotten my fiancée's name. Shocking lapse of memory that!"

He smiled to himself as he puffed with luxurious contentment at a handsome calabash pipe that had been a great favourite with his predecessor. "Seems funny to smoke another chap's pipe," he said to himself, "but of course it's just what I should do to be consistent. And I must say it goes a treat. Ripping tobacco, too."

At this juncture there was again a knock at the door, and when someone entered to clear away the

breakfast things John was apparently immersed in the paper. He had supposed it to be his landlady again, but the lightness and grace of the step caused him to look up.

It was Gladys Woodford.

No doubt it was a very foolish thing for him to do, particularly having regard to his newly assumed rôle, but John suddenly found himself blushing furiously, as, for the first time, he met the shy, half-timid glance of his landlady's pretty daughter. Though he had been duly — if perhaps casually — informed of her existence, no hint had been given him of her personal charms, and for a moment or two he was betrayed into an exhibition of embarrassment and confusion singularly at variance with his previous confidence. Vaguely he wondered if this altogether charming young lady, with those eyes of tenderest blue, could indeed be she of whom his predecessor had spoken in so matter-of-fact a tone as "the girl of about twenty" whom he was to address as Miss Woodford. Instinctively he sought to regain his composure, as, with a murmured yet polite "Good morning" he turned again to his paper.

Meanwhile, Miss Woodford, with more than the suspicion of a blush on her own face, daintily gathered up the breakfast things, wondering coyly to herself as to what might be the cause of Mr. Rutland's entirely unusual embarrassment.

"My word, what a pretty girl!" was John's reflection when she had withdrawn. "Fancy a chap living for months in the same house and not falling in love with her! Why, hang it all, I —. But, no,



what's the good of thinking like that when I'm already engaged to another girl — and such a ripping good sort, too, from what I can make of it?

“Now, the first thing to think of is a plausible excuse to account for my failure to turn up yesterday afternoon at Hyde Park Corner. I don't like the idea, but it's perfectly obvious I shall have to tell a few ‘fibs.’ I gave that chap my word that I would play my part thoroughly, and of course it's to my own interest to do so, since I deliberately agreed to step into his shoes. And, since he was so intensely anxious for me to do so and did all he could to bring that about, there is no occasion for me to feel any compunction in the matter. He's got his wish — to be released from an engagement that had suddenly become irksome, and to be free to go abroad, there to start life afresh and work his way up in the world ‘from the bottom rung of the ladder,’ to use his own words. Sounds rather quixotic, considering the circumstances, I think, but he was evidently in dead earnest. Anyway, I'm quite willing to dodge the bottom rung of the ladder myself, if I can. The more I think of it the more it strikes me that the fellow was a bit eccentric in his ideas. Crikey! it would be rather awkward if he suddenly changed his mind and decided to resume his own identity.”

John's brow puckered for a moment.

“I don't think he is likely to do that though, for he seemed so overwhelmingly relieved when I finally agreed to his proposal, but of course if he should at any time do so there would be absolutely no alternative for me but to retire from the scene as

gracefully as I could. I'm glad he gave me that letter of indemnity which he suggested, because, so long as I am personating him, it would at least be evidence that I was only acting in accordance with his own wishes.

"Now, as to this Miss Knotts—I mean, Flo, bless her! I think the safest plan would be to despatch a telegram excusing myself on the ground of sudden indisposition and proposing to call on her at Ilford to-morrow. I can't very well ask her to turn up again at Hyde Park Corner, and to delay seeing her until to-morrow will give me time to go carefully through the correspondence etc., and make more sure of my ground."

And for some minutes John was busy preparing a suitable telegram that was to ease the troubled mind of his fiancée. His final effort resulted in the following somewhat lengthy despatch: "So sorry to have disappointed you yesterday. Was taken ill, but am better to-day. Hope to call on you to-morrow afternoon. Will this be convenient?" Then, with a smile, he added—"Ever your devoted John."

"I think that ought to satisfy her," he said to himself as he put on his hat and set off for the local telegraph office.

Having duly performed his errand, John applied himself to that very desirable perusal of his fiancée's letters, and (where such existed) the copies of his "double's" replies. The latter, it transpired, were in the form of rough drafts, but of course they served John's purpose just as well, and gave him a useful idea of the style of letter to

adopt in future, besides affording him valuable information as to what he was supposed to have been doing during the past two or three weeks.

He was eagerly devouring the contents of a particularly affectionate epistle from his sweetheart when there was a timid knock on the door and Miss Woodford entered. It was only to say that her mother would like to know if it were Mr. Rutland's intention to be in to lunch that day; to which that young man contrived to reply, with tolerable self-possession, that he would like to lunch at home if it would be quite convenient to Mrs. Woodford.

It was but the briefest of interruptions, yet it was surprising how it disturbed the thread of John's thoughts. "Really," he said to himself, "that's an uncommonly pretty girl. I cannot for the life of me understand how it was that chap didn't fall in love with her. From the casual way in which he spoke of her it was apparent that he had never given her a second thought. It strikes me that the gem for which he sought was close at hand all the time, whereas he was looking far afield for it.

"But, of course, now I come to think of it, it's possible he may have made advances which were not reciprocated. Anyway, it's no use my speculating about the matter. My interests lie in another direction, and there's an end of it."

And so there was — until lunch time came, when another brief but tantalizing glimpse of the same young lady set John wondering anew at his "double's" apparent indifference.

The afternoon was spent in a study of the diary,

an occupation which John found peculiarly engrossing. It covered a period of several months, and had for the most part been kept in a somewhat erratic manner. There were frequent blanks, and many of the entries were almost telegraphic in their brevity. On the other hand, here and there would appear a fuller entry, sometimes in the nature of a little self-analysis, and the perusal of these made clearer to John the combination of circumstances which had induced the writer to make his strange choice.

One thing that caused John some uneasiness was the frequent reference to a certain "Dick D.," who appeared to have been an intimate friend of the diarist, with a weakness for borrowing small sums of money and a predilection for convivial life in the West-end. Before John was half through the diary he decided that he would have to find a way of cutting his supposed acquaintance with that gentleman. It also became evident to him that the diarist had himself lived a life of some gaiety.

A recent entry recorded, in a striking passage of self-analysis, his sudden resolve to reform. Then came glowing references to his romantic attachment to Florence Knotts, whom he described as his guiding star and the true source of all his better impulses.

"Humph," said the new John Rutland to himself when he had come to the end, "I think I can understand the chap's feelings a bit better now, though on the whole this diary only makes me feel how careful I shall have to be whenever I come in contact with anyone who knew him. Particularly this

fellow 'Dick D.' I remember that chap merely spoke of him as his old friend Dick Dashmead, whom I should find a very good sort. Shall I?" He smiled dubiously as he thought of his almost inevitable encounter with that "old friend."

But John was not without resource and determination, and he had no intention of jeopardizing his position for the sake of a little initiative.

"I think I can find a way of dealing with this fellow 'Dick D.' when I see him," he said to himself after a little reflection. "It would be altogether too dangerous merely to break off the acquaintance gradually, because I could scarcely be in his company five minutes before it would be apparent to him that there was something wrong. Why, I should be hopelessly at sea, and might give myself dead away at any moment. No, I shall have to adopt a more drastic method than that.

"Now, let me see just how I stand. I've come across nothing in this diary that leads me to regret the course I was persuaded to adopt. And now, that I am fairly on the job, I think my wisest policy will be to put a bold face on things, though of course I must as far as possible avoid contact with friends — particularly intimate friends — of the vanished John Rutland. That, in fact, is my chief danger.

"From what I can see of it, I shall have little difficulty in imitating the chap's handwriting, an important point that, as I shall no doubt have to sign some sort of acknowledgment when I call at his lawyer's for the usual monthly allowance. Let's see. He told me the next monthly payment

would be due next Monday, and I have quite enough by me to keep me going comfortably till then. It's a certainty that I'm not going to live in the reckless style he did. It's a lick to me how he managed to keep out of debt, but I gathered from his conversation that he had had a bit of luck out of cards, now and again. Well, I'm not going to chance that sort of thing.

"I shall continue the efforts he was latterly making to find a situation, and can, of course, make use of the excellent testimonial his late employers gave him when he left them, though I'm afraid my qualifications don't quite fit in with his. Still, that's only a detail for the moment.

"Then as to my fiancée — Flo. Well, I have little to fear from that quarter, I think, because we have never actually met. I've read all the letters and feel fairly sure of my ground. But one small point that just occurs to me is this: suppose she — or anyone else, for that matter — happens to ask me the date of my birthday? That's bound to arise sooner or later, I suppose. I never thought to ask the fellow that, and no doubt in the haste with which we effected our exchange it didn't occur to him to tell me. But there is probably nothing in that, after all. I may in due course get a clue from someone or other in the shape of congratulations, etc. And, if not, I can give the date of my own birthday, and chance when his fell. In any case, it seems a trifling point to worry about.

"I must say that my first impression of this Miss Knotts is greatly strengthened — that she is a downright good sort. I know already that she

is beautiful from the glimpse I caught of her at Ilford, and I am more than ever tempted to put my 'double's' sudden disappointment in her appearance down to a fickle and erratic temperament. Heaven alone knows what in his romantic fashion he may have pictured her as being like. And the more I think of that very curious coincidence that gave me a glimpse of her the other afternoon, and how strangely impressed I was, there and then, the more I feel convinced that we were fated to be brought together."

The arrival of a telegram at this juncture set John's pulses throbbing anew. He opened and read it eagerly. "So relieved to get your wire. Shall be delighted to see you to-morrow afternoon. Am writing. Your loving Flo."

Mrs. Woodford, looking rather apprehensive, waited at the door in case there should be an answer. The advent of a telegram always had a discomposing effect on that good lady, who was prone to regard it as the invariable precursor of some dire calamity. The smile of happy contentment which lit up her lodger's face, however, as he informed her that there was no answer quickly reassured her.

"Upon my word, I hardly know how to contain myself until to-morrow," was John's reflection when Mrs. Woodford had withdrawn. "Let's make a start at practising my double's handwriting. That will at least help me to pass the time."

## CHAPTER V

### A VISIT TO ILFORD

“WHAT time did you say you were expecting this young man, Flo?”

The speaker was Mr. William Knotts, of Oakfield Lodge, Ilford. He was a man of somewhat remarkable appearance. We’l over six feet in height, with a broad, thick-set, heavy frame suggestive of herculean strength, and a face cut in a hard, rugged mould, there was something strikingly masterful and determined about him. He was clean-shaven, and although apparently still in his prime, the closely-cropped hair on his bullet-shaped head was nearer white than grey. The impression of strength was enhanced by the prominence of a square, massive jaw; whilst the steady, unflinching gaze of a pair of steel-blue eyes, in which lurked a hint of latent fire, betokened a nature devoid of all fear. It was the face of a man whom few would care to thwart or trifle with — a face that stamped its owner as one who would pursue any given purpose with dogged tenacity and ruthless resolve.

The young lady to whom he had just addressed the above question was gazing out of the window, her eyes riveted on the garden gate with an expression of eager expectancy. When she spoke it was in a voice of suppressed excitement.

“I should think he would be here about 4



o'clock, dad," she said without turning her head. "He didn't name a time in his telegram, but in my letter in reply I suggested four, and it's nearly that now."

"Humph," said Mr. Knotts musingly. "May be here at any moment, eh? Well, I think I'll go and smoke a pipe in my den." And he strode leisurely out of the room with a queer, enigmatical smile on his rugged features.

Mr. Knotts' den, as he termed it, was a comfortable, airy apartment, the windows of which commanded a pleasant view of Valentine's Park, which lay just opposite. A stranger, glancing round the room, would have been struck by the extraordinary array of pictures and photos of pugilists, in all manner of truculent poses, that adorned the walls. And conspicuous among them was an excellent likeness of the worthy Mr. Knotts himself. It was a large-size photograph, handsomely framed, and represented that gentleman in a particularly threatening attitude, with the scantiness of attire peculiar to fistic encounters in the ring. Beneath it, in letters of gold, was the following inscription:—

Billy Knotts, heavy-weight champion, as he appeared on the occasion of his memorable battle with "Giant Joe" of Kentucky, whom he defeated in the forty-seventh round.

The conqueror of the aforesaid "Giant Joe" had retired from the ring some years now, after a long and highly successful career. And having combined with his natural fighting instincts a tolerably

thrifty nature, he had succeeded in amassing a not inconsiderable fortune, and might now be described as resting comfortably on his hard-won laurels. Partly by way of amusement, though probably more for an innate love of his old art, he beguiled his leisure by giving private lessons in boxing to some of the "nobs," as he termed the more aristocratic portion of the sporting fraternity; whilst occasionally as a further diversion he would fulfil a week's engagement at a music-hall and give exhibitions of sparring with selected partners amongst the lesser leading lights in the world of pugilism.

The ex-prizefighter had just loaded and lighted a well-seasoned briar pipe when a short, bespectacled, middle-aged lady entered the room. At the moment she conveyed an unmistakable impression of being arrayed in her best.

This was Mrs. Knotts.

"I hope to goodness, William," she said, "that this young man of Flo's is going to turn up this time. It's four o'clock already, and there's no sign of him. What do you think about it?"

Mr. Knotts puffed contemplatively at his pipe for a few moments in silence.

"I should say the odds are he'll turn up," he replied, much as though he were weighing the chances of some sporting event.

"But suppose he doesn't?"

Again the ex-prizefighter pulled thoughtfully at his pipe before replying. Though the contingency which had been suggested appeared to leave him quite unruffled, there was a hint of menace in his reply.

"In that case," he said with quiet emphasis, "I shall go over to East Finchley myself this evening."

Mrs. Knotts looked distinctly perturbed.

"That'll only mean another case for the hospital, William," she said apprehensively. "You had better do nothing of the kind, but simply write for an explanation, at all events, in the first instance. In matters of this kind, personal interviews — where you are concerned — are apt to be dangerous. Only to-day I heard that Frank Thompson — Flo's last young man, you remember — was still in the hospital. The doctors say —"

"Oh, never mind what the doctors say," broke in Mr. Knotts. "Thompson only got his deserts. Let him seek his remedy in the courts — if he dare. And a precious lot of sympathy a strapping young six-footer like him would be likely to get in a case of that kind. Eh? No, my dear, we're not going to have our little girl's affections trifled with for nothing. Not if I know it, anyway.

"But," he went on rather less truculently, "as I said just now, the chances are this young fellow — John Rutland — will turn up right enough. And if we are satisfied that he's all right, and Flo is set on having him, there need not be a lengthy courtship."

But Mrs. Knotts had ever an eye for difficulties. "Ah," she said dubiously, "if we're satisfied. That remains to be seen.

"William," she added portentously, "I have a distinct foreboding of two things. One is that he *won't* turn up. The other is that if he does turn up we shall *not* be satisfied with him." And she

sighed mournfully as she gave expression to this decidedly pessimistic view of the matter.

But as forebodings of events that seldom happened were characteristic of his good wife, Mr. Knotts did not appear to be so much impressed as he might have been. He merely shrugged his broad shoulders, blew a cloud of smoke from his pipe, and watched its gradual dispersal in meditative silence. He was by nature a man of few words, and it was evident he had said all he had to say on the matter.

"There's no getting away from the fact, William," continued Mrs. Knotts, "that our Flo has been somewhat unfortunate in her love affairs. And the worst of it is, she seems so desperately anxious — I'm bound to say it — to have a young man. Although we indulge her in every possible way, I really don't believe the girl will be happy until she has a home of her own. That's about the top and bottom of it, William. And if we don't look out, some fellow will eventually marry her simply for her money. Upon my word, I've more than once regretted that her Uncle George didn't leave his money to charities instead of to Flo. There is so little sincerity in the world. Now, isn't that so, William?"

Appealed to in this direct fashion, Mr. Knotts admitted that the human attribute referred to was not, perhaps, so general as it might be, but as at this stage his interest appeared to be chiefly centred in blowing a succession of graceful smoke-rings from his pipe, Mrs. Knotts resignedly took the hint and left him.

Meanwhile, the young man whose appearance was

so eagerly — not to say, anxiously — awaited, was assuredly not far distant. He had ascertained on his arrival at Ilford station the situation of Oakfield Lodge, and finding it to be on the borders of the very park in which, only the other day, he had caught that brief yet entrancing glimpse of the girl who had since become his fiancée and whom he was now about to see, he had yielded to a romantic impulse to linger for a few moments at the spot which he had already come to regard as hallowed ground.

And it was with strangely mingled feelings that, for a brief while, he even sat down upon the identical seat whereon he had rested so recently under such different circumstances.

“Good lord!” he muttered to himself in awed tones, “it seems more like some improbable and fantastic dream than real life. Heavens, I should have thought myself uncommonly lucky then if I had chanced to pick up a blessed bob. And now I have a comfortable private income, and am engaged to the very girl by whom — from one fleeting glimpse — I was so strangely impressed that afternoon. Really, I hardly know even now whether I am not dreaming. I’m continually obsessed with the idea that it’s all too good to be true.

“Well, here goes for the eventful plunge, anyway. She said four o’clock in her letter, and it’s just that now. Hang it all, I feel a bit nervous now it comes to the point. I hope to goodness her people aren’t awfully stiff and grand. After the sort of life I’ve been living the last year or so — but I’ve got to forget all about that now. I’m John Rutland now,

who has never known hardship and want." And he smiled to himself rather grimly as he made his way out of the park.

A minute's walk from the entrance brought him to the gateway of Oakfield Lodge, a detached, substantially-built house, surrounded by a pleasant garden.

With curious inconsistency, in view of the eagerness with which he had looked forward to his meeting with Florence Knotts, John felt a moment's hesitancy about entering. It was as though some vague premonition of the depth of the plunge he was about to take came to him. But it was for an instant only. With a muttered "Here goes," he pushed open the heavy gate, and with throbbing pulses advanced up the garden path. He was dimly conscious of a fluttering at one of the windows as though someone had hastily withdrawn, and in another moment he was timidly pressing the electric bell.

After what seemed to John, in his nervous state, an eternity, a demure parlour-maid opened the door, and in answer to his enquiry for Miss Knotts conducted him to a large, handsomely-furnished drawingroom, and politely invited him to take a seat. The blinds were partially drawn, screening the glare of sunshine from without, and imparting a certain subdued half-light that tended to enhance rather than diminish the impression of elegance and refinement.

Poor John, the erstwhile outcast, felt distinctly uncomfortable as he furtively surveyed his luxurious surroundings. "Yes, I feared as much," he

said to himself apprehensively.: "Rather grand people, that's what they are, for a cert. I hope to goodness I shan't make a fool of myself. 'Pon my word, I half wish, after all, I had suggested another meeting at Hyde Park Corner instead of having to go through this ordeal."

Suddenly his roving gaze lighted upon a photo in a very elaborate gilt frame, and in spite of himself he started slightly, "So that's me, is it?" he reflected, as he eyed with not unnatural interest the photo of the young man into whose shoes he had stepped. "Uncommonly good likeness, too!"

John had not seen the photo before, for it had been the only one that his "double" had by him at the time of his acquaintance with Miss Knotts. There was something reassuring in this unlooked-for reminder of the extraordinary resemblance that existed between himself and the original John Rutland, and he plucked up courage a little as he surreptitiously took a closer peep at the photo. "I'll bet she'll never twig the difference," he said to himself. "Why, I'm really on safer ground here than at my digs."

But at this moment his reflections were abruptly interrupted by the sound of a light, quick step in the hall outside. John instantly assumed an appearance of gentlemanly abstraction that admirably belied the strange conflict of emotions that surged within him.

Then the handle of the door was turned and someone stepped, half-eagerly, half-shyly, into the room. Mechanically, John rose to his feet, his pulses throbbing tumultuously.

"John! 'At last!"

With something that was half a cry and half a sob, Miss Knotts almost flung herself upon the trembling John.

It was certainly an embarrassing moment for that already rather agitated young man. Never for an instant had he anticipated such a greeting as this at the first encounter. Indeed, he had even had a vague idea of a decorous shaking of hands by way of formal introduction, so to speak, coupled very possibly with a somewhat critical mutual survey of each other. Instead, he found himself returning his sweetheart's affectionate embrace with responsive warmth, while as yet he knew no more of her personal charms than were already familiar to him from her photo. What with the subdued light of the room and the excitement of his feelings, he had gathered nothing fresh in that momentary face to face glimpse.

How he thrilled at the touch of that hand about his neck and the passionate pressure of those lips upon his own!

For a brief space the two young people remained locked in a silent embrace, poor John completely carried away by the suddenness of his fiancée's demonstration of loyalty and love. Vaguely, at the back of his mind, was a sense of reproach and wonder that he whose place he now took should have so lightly cast aside such a devoted lover. Thank heaven, she need never know the shameful disappointment and humiliation which had so nearly been her fate.

"My own darling," he murmured lovingly, as he



gently sought to raise the head that now hid itself upon his breast.

It was characteristic of Mrs. Knotts' want of tact — for she had always been somewhat lacking in that attribute — that she should appear on the scene at this precise moment. But, so engrossed were the lovers that for some seconds her ill-timed entry was not observed, and had she retained her presence of mind she might have discreetly withdrawn without anyone being the wiser. But that was not Mrs. Knotts' way.

It was a great relief to her motherly feelings that this problematical young man to whom her daughter was engaged had indeed turned up. But it remained to be seen whether he was satisfactory, and it was her duty, she told herself, to lose no time in forming an opinion on this crucial point.

As a means of making her presence known she now gave vent to a half-apologetic, half-assertive cough, which achieved its purpose at the cost of no little confusion on the part of the lovers. This in turn appeared to re-act on Mrs. Knotts, who now showed signs of embarrassment herself. She had entered the room prepared with a few carefully considered words of welcome for her daughter's young man, but the only sound that escaped her lips was a somewhat belated "Oh!" of mingled astonishment and bewilderment, an exclamation which, to have been of convincing spontaneity, should have made itself heard a few seconds sooner.

It was Miss Knotts who was the first to regain composure. Smilingly, she effected a formal, yet graceful, little introduction between her mother

and John, the latter of whom had not yet recovered from the guilty blushes which had overwhelmed him when, in the midst of his love-making, he had suddenly become aware of the cold scrutiny of a third party.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Rutland," said Mrs. Knotts conventionally as she shook hands and gazed anxiously through her gold-rimmed spectacles at the young man, concerning whose qualities of mind and heart she had recently expressed such misgivings.

But there was something in that frank, open face, with its honest eyes, which, in spite of signs of present embarrassment, quickly reassured Mrs. Knotts, who, whatever her shortcomings, was not lacking in a woman's intuition. She noted with satisfaction his quiet, gentlemanly bearing, and there was a certain hint of diffidence — perhaps almost of shyness — that was in pleasing contrast to Mrs. Knotts' conception of the average modern young man.

Meanwhile, Flo, with a pretty gesture towards her lover, tripped lightly from the room, saying that she would let her father know that John had arrived. And although as yet he had only had a tantalising glimpse of her, John was not altogether sorry for this, as it enabled him the better to recover himself. Perhaps, too, Mrs. Knotts found some satisfaction in her daughter's temporary withdrawal, for she appeared to regard it as affording her an excellent opportunity to put a few leading and — in her eyes — highly desirable questions. Her method may have been somewhat precipitate,

but, as she had more than once told her husband, she was anxious to get at "the vitals of the situation," as she termed it, with as little delay as possible, a course in which her naturally inquisitive nature aided and abetted her in no small measure.

Consequently, John now found himself going through what seemed to him like a thinly-veiled cross-examination, but although he felt some surprise at its suddenness his anxiety to produce a good impression on the lady whom he already regarded as his prospective mother-in-law caused him to answer her questions with unaffected readiness and candour.

He had just explained to her the source and extent of his income under his father's will, and admitted that at present that was his sole means of subsistence, when the door opened and Mr. Knotts strode into the room, closely followed by his blushing daughter.

"How d'you do, Mr. Rutland?" said the prizefighter as he shook hands with John without waiting for any formal introduction. His tone was more guarded than cordial, and for a few moments his cold, stern blue eyes scrutinised John as though he would read him through and through.

John was somewhat taken aback at the formidable, almost bellicose, appearance of his prospective father-in-law as he towered before him.

"Your first visit to Ilford, I suppose, Mr. Rutland?" enquired Mr. Knotts casually.

"I have been here once before," answered John after a moment's hesitancy. "Except for that, I don't know this part at all."

"You never told me in any of your letters, dear, that you had been to Ilford before." Flo had linked her arm lovingly in John's and looked up at him as she spoke with an air of playful reproach.

And for the first time their eyes met as 'only lovers' eyes can meet.

It was well for John that he had naturally a fair measure of self-command. Doubtless, too, the very circumstances of his position — his impersonation of another — kept the need of this quality ever uppermost in his mind. For an instant, he wondered vaguely if his eye-sight were suddenly playing him a weird trick.

Then the truth dawned upon him, and in a flash he understood the seeming fickleness of the young man whose place he had taken.

But, though his disappointment was intense, his sudden disillusionment, complete enough though it was, could scarcely compare with that of the original John Rutland, in whose poetic fancy Miss Knotts had been pictured as a Heaven-sent angel. The impersonator's feelings had not quite that depth and poignancy that his luckless "double" had experienced, for the simple reason that the circumstances of his regard for the young lady in question had been on a different footing. His nature, too, was cast in a more practical mould. Perhaps his sensations might best be described as a painful consciousness of descent — as humiliating as it was sudden — from the sublime to the ridiculous.

With remarkable presence of mind, however, he gave no visible sign of the dismay that filled him.

Paramount in his mind was the thought that for the time being he must at all costs contrive to conceal his feelings. To declare, there and then, that he was disappointed in the young lady's appearance, would have been worse than brutal. He would have to find a more delicate way of bringing this deplorable fact to her knowledge. It was evident that the blushing girl at his side, whose eyes now drooped in maidenly modesty, had as yet no inkling of the truth.

It was really very fortunate that at this precise moment Mrs. Knotts should have suggested that they should all take a walk in the park; as it averted a situation which for John was full of embarrassment.

"Come along, Flo, dear," she said quite briskly. "We will get our things on while your father looks after Mr. Rutland."

"I suppose you smoke?" queried Mr. Knotts, turning to John as the ladies retired.

John admitted that he did, and Mr. Knotts conducted him to his den. His manner became more cordial now. He had, like his wife, already formed a favourable opinion of this quiet-mannered, honest-looking young fellow. He was not a bad judge of men, and he decided that John Rutland was at all events straight.

"Try one of these weeds, Mr. Rutland," he said with an evident desire to place his visitor at his ease.

And thus John found himself smoking a choice, if somewhat strong, cigar, while he noted with considerable astonishment the extraordinary prevail-

ence of pictures of a fighting type in the room.

"Yes," said Mr. Knotts, as he observed John's glance, "I've done a bit of that sort of thing in my time." Then, with a jerk of his thumb at the large portrait over the mantel-piece, he added with perhaps pardonable pride, "That's me."

"Oh, really!" said John, not a little impressed, as he read the inscription. Though he had never taken a very keen interest in sport, the name of the former champion heavy-weight pugilist was not unfamiliar to him. But it had certainly not occurred to him to connect his fiancée's father with that once outstanding personage.

"Do anything in the boxing line yourself, Mr. Rutland?" enquired the ex-prizefighter as he ran his eye critically over John's youthful but well-set-up figure.

"Well, I have done a bit, now and again. But I'm afraid I can claim no skill at it," was the modest reply.

"You've got the cut of a hefty light-weight, anyway," said Mr. Knotts with an encouraging nod. "Very pleased to put you up to a wrinkle or two any time you feel like a friendly spar."

And when the ladies presently appeared, attired for their walk, he was entertaining John with some reminiscences of the prize-ring. Whereupon, they issued forth, and in another minute John found himself strolling in Valentine's Park with the young lady to whom he had become engaged under such strange circumstances, her arm now linked affectionately in his, whilst his prospective parents-in-law followed at a discreet distance.

## CHAPTER VI

### BENJAMIN CREEK APPEARS ON THE SCENE

ON the morning following John Rutland's first visit to Oakfield Lodge a tall, red-headed young man of about thirty years of age might have been seen emerging from a lodging-house in a quiet back street of Pimlico. He had a narrow, crafty face, from which a pair of uncommonly watchful, near-set eyes looked out with an expression of perpetual alertness. His clothes were well-worn but not shabby, and he carried himself with an ease that suggested muscular activity.

This was Mr. Benjamin Creek, whose secret boast was that he was quite unknown to the police, a fact on which he had frequent occasion to congratulate himself. If Mrs. Tozer, his landlady, had been asked as to what might be the trade or occupation of her "fourth-floor-back" lodger she would probably have replied that she neither knew nor cared, but that he always paid his rent "reg'lar," and never seemed hard up for a bob. Perhaps, too, being a lady who was very much occupied with house-work, she would have added that it was not her business to pry into the affairs of her lodgers, and that so long as they came home sober and paid their way she didn't care a jot what they were, a point of view, be it stated, which coincided admirably with Benjamin Creek's sentiments and purposes.

Mr. Creek looked eminently pleased with himself this morning as he swung along in the direction of Victoria Street. He deftly boarded a passing Charing Cross 'bus, and having reached that busy centre made his way by Tube to Highgate. Thence a two-mile ride on an electric tram car brought him to the pleasant, semi-rural suburb of East Finchley.

He looked a trifle more pre-occupied as he alighted at his destination, and, striking off to the left near the station, made his way along a quiet road.

This was Benjamin Creek's second visit to East Finchley, the former occasion having been a certain recent evening when he had skilfully shadowed a couple of young men whom he had good reason to know contemplated effecting an exchange of identities. There was not the least doubt in Creek's mind that that exchange had been duly carried out, and he had been busily engaged in the interval maturing his plans on that assumption.

Benjamin Creek never acted hastily in these matters, for he knew the danger of a false step. Though he had regarded it as a rare bit of luck that had enabled him to overhear that highly important conversation in Hyde Park the other afternoon, he had no exaggerated idea of the possibilities, from the L.s.d. point of view, that lay in the *coup* he was about to attempt. But he told himself that, properly handled, it should prove an easy source of obtaining frequent payments of money for some time to come, whilst at the back of his mind lurked a scheme for ultimately compelling his victim to raise a lump sum to be rid of his impor-



tunities. This fitted in very well with Creek's present plans, for he had other more or less similar sources of obtaining the wherewithal for subsistence — and a bit over — without the painful necessity of having to work.

Work, common, plebeian work, had always been Creek's pet aversion, and being quite untroubled with any moral sense he had long ago abandoned himself to a life of crime. Now he was a specialist — in blackmail, a field of activity in which his natural cunning, together with a certain plausibility of manner, stood him in good stead.

Let us now, for a moment, leave the unsavory personality of Benjamin Creek, still bent on his vampire quest, and take a peep at his intended victim.

That young man was looking distinctly worried. Pipe in mouth, he was pacing thoughtfully up and down his comfortable sittingroom, and reviewing the events of the previous afternoon and evening.

"Hanged if I can see a way out of it," he said to himself for the twentieth time that morning. "I seem to have made such an infernally good impression all round. Got to go out there again, too, this afternoon, and the old lady has made things worse by giving me a very broad hint that I might bring an engagement ring with me." He gave a wry smile at the recollection of this. "Gad! That'll tie me up more than ever, of course. 'Pon my word, I can't help feeling that they're in a mighty big hurry to see us spliced.

"Of course, I suppose I'm strictly under a moral obligation to that chap to see the thing through,

but — well, I feel I simply *could not* marry the girl. I didn't bargain for anything of this sort, and he ought to have given me the straight tip as to what to expect. Seems to me he altogether glossed it over. Never was I so taken aback as when I got my first square look at the girl. And to think that only a few moments before I had been hugging her! Still worse, that her mother should have seen it! Really, the whole affair is most mortifying. I don't a bit wonder now at that chap jumping at the chance of getting out of his predicament, even at such a sacrifice. But I don't think I shall follow his example — just yet at all events — and do a bunk. No, I must see if I can't find some way out of it without going to that length. I've had more than my share already of hardship and want, and I don't intend lightly to throw up a comfortable private income if I can help it." And John shuddered as the recollection of his recent sufferings and privations came to him like a hideous nightmare.

"If only she had turned out as I pictured her to be," he went on musingly. "Yet it wasn't that she was altogether ugly, in spite of that somewhat disconcerting squint. I think it was the unexpected difference in her expression full-face to what it was in profile that knocked me out. I wish to goodness she had been disappointed in *me*," he added ruefully. "Lord, how she rushed at me the moment she came into the room! No wonder I didn't get a chance to see what she was like then.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to trot out to Ilford again this afternoon, though how on earth I am to

take that engagement ring with me I don't know.

"No. On the whole, I think the best plan will be to be quite frank on that point and say I haven't sufficient money by me to buy it at the moment. They know I'm out of a job, and the girl also knows, from the letters I am supposed to have written her, that until I got engaged to her I had been living up to my income, without any attempt to save. Let's see. This is Friday, and that chap told me that the next monthly payment would be due this coming Monday. So I haven't long to wait before I shall have a bit to spare.

"But the dreadful poser is — how best to break the engagement off. Strikes me, it'll have to be a gradual process, though it seems rather a rotten thing to have to contemplate. It would simplify matters, of course, if the girl happened to get tired of me. Otherwise — well, I can see a pretty lively time ahead for me if I don't look out. There'll be that prizefighting father of hers to reckon with. Whew!" said John to himself with another wry smile, "he'd just about smash me to smithereens. I'll bet he's got a punch like a mule's kick."

It was at this stage of John Rutland's not altogether pleasant reflections that Mrs. Woodford tapped at the door and handed him a gentleman's visiting card on a silver tray. He picked it up and glanced at it curiously. It bore, in very neat lettering, the name of Benjamin Creek. There was no address.

"Who the dickens —" he began in a muttered undertone. Then he checked himself. This, he reflected warily, was no doubt one of those

"friends" whom he was supposed to know — perhaps even an intimate "friend." He was in no mood just then to face the risky ordeal of a personal encounter if it could be avoided, and he promptly resolved to try and dodge it.

"I'm afraid I'm too busy to see Mr. Creek this morning, Mrs. Woodford," he said somewhat lamely. "You might tell him so, with my compliments, if you would, please."

"Certainly, sir," said Mrs. Woodford readily enough. She had not been at all prepossessed with the visitor's appearance, and she came to the conclusion from her lodger's manner that Mr. Creek was probably an acquaintance whom he desired to cut. She secretly approved of Mr. Rutland's discrimination.

John chuckled to himself as his landlady withdrew. "That'll send him off in a huff, I expect, whoever he is," he thought. "No good risking any blessed interviews with people who know me, if I can possibly help it. That's just how I shall have to treat that chap Dick D. when he turns up — as he's pretty sure to do soon enough, I suppose."

But his satisfaction was short-lived. A few moments later, Mrs. Woodford reappeared. This time there was a hint of resignation in her manner.

"I gave the gentleman your message, sir," she said, "but I was to tell you that he had come some distance to see you on a matter of great importance. He said you would guess what it was about," Mrs. Woodford added dubiously, "and that he was sure you would wish to see him."

John, who was beginning to feel rather uncom-

fortable, endeavoured to conceal his perplexity at this, to him, entirely mystifying message. He thought for a moment.

"Did he seem surprised that I was too busy to see him?" he queried casually.

"Yes, I must say he did," was the reply.

It occurred to John that he might, for all he knew to the contrary, be running a greater risk in not seeing this "friend" than in getting the interview over, there and then.

"Oh, well," he said with admirably assumed indifference, "perhaps I may as well see Mr. Creek. Ask him up, Mrs. Woodford, will you please?"

"Confounded nuisance," he muttered to himself when that lady had withdrawn again. "Wonder what on earth it can be that he wants to see me about so particularly. That's the worst of being so hopelessly in the dark. I'll swear I never came across the name of Benjamin Creek in that chap's diary." He felt a trifle nervous at the prospect of facing someone who doubtless knew a good deal more about his supposed past than he did himself. But he kept himself well in hand, and was in the act of nonchalantly lighting a cigarette when his visitor entered the room.

"Hullo, Rutland, how are you, old man? I began to wonder what on earth could be the matter when your good landlady calmly informed me you were too busy to see me. One of your little jokes, eh? You always were a beggar for them."

John found himself shaking hands — with an affectation of cordiality which he was far from feeling — with as lanky and cadaverous a specimen of man-

hood as he had ever encountered. His first impression was one of astonishment that the young man into whose shoes he had stepped could ever have been on friendly terms with such an evil-visaged person. Those crafty, watchful eyes, those thin, cruel lips, twisted now into a would-be ingratiating smile, aroused within John a sense of instinctive distrust.

Yet it was obvious to him that the man must have been on terms of some intimacy with his predecessor, and in spite of his visitor's repellent appearance there was that in his manner which led John to infer the existence of a mutually friendly spirit. It was as distasteful as it was disquieting to John, but he had the sense to accept the situation as he found it. There was nothing for it but to play his part with all the coolness at his command.

"How are you Creek?" he said with just sufficient warmth. "You must excuse the message I sent down to you, but as it happens I really was very busy this morning. Just cudgelling my brains over an important letter I have to write. I thought perhaps you would have looked back a little later, but of course it doesn't matter. Sit down, won't you?"

"Thanks. Too bad of me to disturb you when you are so pre-occupied, but—. Well, of course you can guess what I've come about?" And he darted a look of significant interrogation at John.

That young man's dominant sensation at the moment was a dread lest he should give himself away. He knew that even a thoughtlessly framed question might be sufficient to start a train of suspicion that

would lead to the eventual discovery of his impersonation. Considering the obvious difficulties of his position, he showed commendable resource.

"You refer, I suppose, to — er —" he began in non-committal tones, secretly hoping that his visitor would supply the blank. The ruse so far succeeded, though it opened up a fresh vista of the unknown.

"Yes — to what happened at Bedford."

John checked an exclamation. He did not know that he was supposed ever to have been to Bedford. He had an uncomfortable feeling of being on very thin ice, with a painful consciousness that at any moment an unwary step might send him through. He kept his head, however, and with the object of concealing his growing uneasiness deliberately assumed a certain devil-may-care manner.

"Well, fire away, Creek," he said, almost gaily. "Tell us all about it."

"Sh'sh; not quite so loud, old man, in case we're overheard," said Creek warningly as he shot a swift glance towards the door to make sure it was closed. "Heavens, though, I envy you your nerve and cool lack of concern. Why, I half expected to find you looking worried to death over the dreadful affair." And for a few moments he regarded John with an expression of frank wonder.

"What's the good of worrying?" said the latter with well-feigned indifference as he blew a ring of smoke from his cigarette. Secretly, he felt that he would have given anything for two minutes' private conversation with his vanished double, but his manner remained as unperturbed as ever.

The crafty blackmailer felt it was time to put the screw on a bit. Truth to tell, he was a trifle chagrined at the complete self-possession of his intended prey. There was none of that eagerness or anxiety — much less confusion — which his luckless victims usually betrayed.

"Quite right not to worry about it if you are able to look at it in that light," he said with curious significance, "but the worst of it is," — lowering his voice mysteriously and leaning towards John — "*they've found the girl's body!*"

Ah, that had done the trick!

Creek's evil visage, however, gave no sign of the gloating satisfaction with which he noted the unmistakable start or the sudden blanching of features whose strained expression now told their own tale of newly-born fear. Indeed, he appeared to be entirely unconscious of the startling effect his words had produced, as, still in that significant undertone, he went on.

"So far, Rutland, I may tell you, I believe you are safe. *So far*, mind you," he added ominously. "I hope, by the way, you were never indiscreet enough to make any reference in your diary to your little trips to Bedford? I don't need to tell you that if it should presently fall into the hands of the police it might be used in evidence against you."

Poor John's state of mind may be better imagined than described. What was the meaning of all this vague reference to a crime of which he had not the remotest knowledge? Still worse, what was his supposed — and, as it seemed to him, already



half-admitted — connection with it? For an instant, an impulse seized him to prove his innocence by confessing, there and then, to his impersonation. But a moment's reflection suggested what seemed to him the wiser course of trying first to elicit further information, and then taking time to consider his course of action. He could prove his innocence whenever the need arose, if indeed it arose at all. It was quite possible that his supposed implication might prove to be less serious and direct than Creek's words and manner had thus far led him to infer. And he shrank instinctively from disclosing to this odious creature the secret of his impersonation, an act which, for obvious reasons, would render it highly dangerous, if not impossible, for him to continue any longer in the rôle of John Rutland.

In short, in spite of his suddenly aroused fears, John was against undue precipitancy. He was not without wit and resource, and he promptly determined to temporise. One thing struck him at once. If he wished to play his double's part successfully he must be wary of asking questions which would betray an ignorance of events of which he was supposed to have knowledge.

"Safe, so far, eh?" he repeated almost casually, after the brief pause that had followed Creek's last remark. "Glad to know that, though I can't say I've worried much about it. As to the diary, I don't think I ever made any reference in it to Bedford. . . . By the way, Creek," he added with an appearance of callousness that said much for his self-command, "won't you have a cigar? May as well smoke, you know, even if you have a lot to tell me. ous surroundings. "Yes, I feared as much," he

"A delicate hint for me to proceed, I suppose," said Creek with an insinuating smile, as with exasperating deliberation, he selected a cigar from the box that was offered to him.

"Goodness knows, though," he went on when at length he had lit up, "I've little enough cause to beat about the bush. My own position in the matter — although so different to yours — is not a pleasant one." He paused for a moment as though hesitating how to proceed. Then, puffing the while at his cigar, he launched forth upon his statement in a manner which could scarcely have been better calculated to leave John in precisely that condition of bewilderment and alarm which it was Creek's purpose to produce.

"Ever since you paid that ill-fated visit to Bedford," he began, "I've been dreading they would — *find it*. As I told you when you confided to me your intentions, you were running a ghastly risk. And — although I've not come here to rub this in — you know I did my utmost to put you off the job. Of course, your position now is — er — well, to say the least of it, extremely dangerous.

"However, you know all that as well as I do, however much you may affect to view it coolly. And, as I said just now, I only wish I had your nerve. *You'll need it, Rutland, depend upon it*. The police are leaving no stone unturned to find the — er — *the murderer*, and for some purpose of their own they are, I understand, trying to keep the whole affair out of the papers — until, of course, they make an arrest.

"Now, I'll tell you what I've decided to do so far

as I am concerned, and I think you will agree that the course I am going to take will also be best in your own interests. You see, although I had nothing to do with the job myself and was dead against it, *I know too much about it for my peace of mind.*" Here Creek smiled in a way which might have been intended merely to suggest qualms of conscience, but it seemed to John that there was something peculiarly insinuating in the curve of those thin, compressed lips.

"Just imagine, Rutland," he went on again, his long, bony hands now clasped across his knees, "what a painful position it would be for me, knowing what I do, if the police interrogated me on the matter. And in view of my well-known acquaintance with the—er—the deceased, that's exactly what they would do. Rutland, old chap,"—and here Creek wagged his head mournfully—"I should find myself dragged into admissions which would only too plainly place the guilt of this awful crime upon the head of—. But I can't go on—it's really too—too painful—too dreadful. I—"

At this stage Creek's feelings suddenly got the better of him. He hastily placed his cigar in the ash-tray by his side, and, to John's infinite discomfiture, actually buried his face in his hands and sobbed. For a few moments, as he remained thus, there was a series of slight convulsive movements expressive of overwhelming remorse and sorrow. But to John there was something singularly revolting in the spectacle, and it was with difficulty that he restrained his impatience. He could not rid himself of that instinctive sense of distrust which

had been his first impression of his visitor. Moreover, he was consumed with a burning desire to know more, to gain a little light where as yet all was darkness and mystery. For this latter reason he made a show of some sympathy, though the effort went much against the grain.

"Never mind, Creek. Don't take on like that," he said with a sort of brisk cheeriness which doubtless caused that disreputable character to smile to himself. "I understand your feelings in the matter. Just go on where you left off. What is it you propose to do?"

Creek pulled himself together with a quite dramatic effort, dabbed his eyes with his pocket-handkerchief, and resumed his cigar with an air of pathetic resignation.

"Very weak of me to give way like that," he said apologetically, "but I really couldn't help it. Truth is, I'm terribly overwrought. I am glad to know you appreciate my feelings in the matter.

"As I was saying, Rutland, *I know too much*. Would to heaven I didn't! But your trust in me shall not be misplaced. Whatever fate may overtake you, I don't intend, if I can help it, to be the instrument — the unwilling instrument — of bringing it about."

Would he never come to the point? John wondered to himself. What *was* at the back of all this horrible innuendo?

"Yes, I quite understand all that Creek," he murmured quietly. "Go on."

"So I think the best thing I can do in your interests — though it will mean a dreadful wrench to

me — is to *clear out of the country.*” And Creek paused and looked across at John as much as to say, “Now what do you think of that for an act of self-sacrifice?”

It struck John that no doubt the country could very well spare him, but he contented himself with a non-committal “I see,” and waited for Creek to enlarge further upon his plan.

“Yes,” he said, “I shall go right away. Out to Australia, as a matter of fact. Never mind that it means throwing up my nice little job and comfortable prospects at Bedford — never mind that it means parting, perhaps for ever, with those who are nearest and dearest to me. Never mind all this, I say, so that I do not prove the unwilling instrument that brings you to a felon’s —”

Here Creek developed fresh symptoms of emotional trouble, and it looked as if it might be “touch and go” whether he did not break down again altogether. John regarded him with feelings of mingled concern and exasperation, but this time he preserved a stony silence. For the life of him he could not bring himself to express sympathy for this creature who was becoming more and more odious to him every minute. It may therefore have been that the agitated Creek derived a new source of strength from his consciousness of noble self-sacrifice, for, after a brief period of the “touch and go” stage, he recovered himself, and went on again with heroic fortitude.

“I have said enough on that point; indeed, more than I had intended to. . . . I know you understand all that my sacrifice means to me. And it is

because I know you understand all that, and realise how very much to *your own interest and safety* it is that I should make myself scarce that I feel I may look to you now for the help I need to enable me to carry out my plan. Little did I dream when you made me that promise at Bedford to assist me to the utmost of your power if ever the need arose — little, indeed, did I dream that the need would so soon arise.

“Now, Rutland, as you well know, I am not one to borrow money. Never was, in fact. But —” and here Creek spoke as though with an effort to discharge himself of a very unpleasant duty — “my sense of loyalty to you compels me for once to waive my principles — may I call them my cherished principles? — to ask you — er — for the loan of twenty-five pounds to take me out to Australia. You alone will know where I have gone, and my would-be questioners will be baulked at the outset, whilst the chief source of danger to yourself will have — vanished!”

John, still outwardly calm in spite of the sense of bewilderment and horror which Creek’s cunningly devised innuendo had produced, thought he detected a flaw in his visitor’s reasoning, and he seized upon it if only as a means of gaining time.

“It seems to me, Creek,” he said quietly, “that the course you propose taking would tend to throw suspicion upon yourself. No sooner is the girl’s body found than you, who admittedly knew her well, suddenly and mysteriously vanish. To say the least of it, it would look rather ‘fishy,’ wouldn’t it?”

Creek regarded John in a way which was somewhat disconcerting to the latter. "My dear fellow," he exclaimed in tones of frank amazement, "you appear to forget that on the night the deed was done I was in Luton, where I remained for several weeks on business for my firm. Didn't you yourself and old Ferguson see me off the previous afternoon? It's perfectly obvious. I have nothing to fear for myself. It's only *what I know* of the circumstances that would render my position unenviable if I were dragged in as a witness for the prosecution. May I ask you, old man, to imagine what my feelings, as your pal, would be then, when I saw you standing in the dock on a charge of — Ugh," and Creek shuddered with inexpressible horror.

"Don't you think," he added with a smile that was somehow more like a leer, "that my proposed self-effacement would probably be the best thing I could do in your interests? Placed in the witness-box, I would be absolutely cornered, and the truth would be dragged out of me. And where would you be then, old fellow?"

"Quite so," assented John with a composure he was far from feeling. "But the worst of it is, I couldn't put my hand on £25 now, or even a quarter of that sum, to save my life."

Creek looked at him curiously. "You may as well say — to save your *neck*," he said with again the suspicion of a leer. "Surprising what a chap will do for that." But he quickly checked himself, and went on with becoming gravity. "I have no doubt you can find a way of raising the money,

considering the urgent need. When is your next monthly payment due?"

"On Monday," replied John, wondering uneasily how much Creek knew of his private affairs.

"Humph. Well, let's see. You'll get £12-10-0 then, which, of course, is only half the amount I need. But no doubt the solicitors to whom you go for these periodical payments—I forget their name for the moment—no doubt they could arrange a little loan of, say, twenty pounds. This would enable you to pack me off out of the way, and"—with an air of magnanimity—"leave you something over to carry on with till the next monthly payment."

The utter coolness of this proposal staggered John and increased his sense of resentment to a pitch that taxed to the utmost his self-command. But the difficulties of his position compelled him to curb his feelings, and, as the best means of getting rid of his visitor, he decided to appear to agree to his suggestion. This would at least give him time to consider the matter.

"I'll see what I can do, Creek," he said in businesslike tones. "Come to me next Tuesday, about this time in the morning, and I'll let you know the result. But I'm rather doubtful if they'll make the advance, and of course I can't do impossibilities."

"I'm sure you'll manage it somehow," said Creek significantly. "After all, it's *for your own safety* that I'm making this great sacrifice, Rutland. Oh, I'm sure you'll manage it *somehow*. . . . I'll be here on Tuesday morning—for my passage-money to Australia. Good-bye, old chap, good-bye!"



And he shook John's hand cordially, almost affectionately, whilst the suspicion of a leer again passed over his crafty face like an evil shadow.

## CHAPTER VII

### DICK DASHMEAD TURNS UP

It required a good deal to interfere with John's healthy appetite, but he had to confess to himself that for once he was quite unable to do justice to the dainty little lunch to which he sat down shortly after Benjamin Creek had taken his departure. The discovery of his presumed acquaintance — indeed, intimacy — with such a person, together with all the dark hints of hidden crime which had been showered upon him, had induced a state of mental perturbation in which the mere thought of food was nauseating.

"Hanged if I can get on with the grub to-day," he said to himself, after he had for some time been making a painstaking and conspicuously unsuccessful effort to clear a plate of cold lamb and salad. "That sly-faced fellow, with his wretched, sordid insinuations about some poor girl whom apparently I am supposed to have ruthlessly 'done in,' has quite unnerved me. I'll have the things cleared away and put on a smoke. I want to think," And he pushed his unfinished plate from him and rang the bell with a hint of impatience.

Mrs. Woodford duly appeared in answer to the summons, and when she observed the almost disregarded meal (the tempting little pie and dish of

stewed fruit remained untouched) an expression of surprise and concern crossed her somewhat harassed features.

"It's not the fault of the food, Mrs. Woodford," said John, observing this. "Everything's all right — except myself. I'm a bit off colour to-day. A touch of biliousness, I think," he added, with an attempt to be convincing.

"Dear me, I'm sorry to hear that," said Mrs. Woodford, wondering uneasily whether anything she had served with the breakfast of which her lodger had partaken so heartily that morning could have upset him. "Ah," she went on in tones of mournful retrospection, "many's the bilious attack I've had in my younger days. And never a word of sympathy did I get, but just sent to bed. And my diet on those occasions, sir, would be confined to a pill. Such an evil-tasting pill it was, too, sir. Used to make me feel tired of life every time I took one. And now, alas, I often feel tired of life without the aid of a pill. But there, I suppose one can only grin and bear it," she added, as she gathered up the tray, with an expression which was certainly far from resembling any kind of grin.

John was too worried and pre-occupied to pay much attention to the ruminations of his landlady, who, apparently attributing his silence to lack of sympathy, bore her burden of crockery and edibles from the room with a sadly-murmured, "Ah, well! Who cares for poor old me!"

Directly he was alone John got out the little diary his predecessor had kept, and began a feverish search through its pages on the bare chance of

there being some reference to Bedford which he had overlooked in his earlier scrutiny. But, as he expected, there was none, and every time he came across a blank that covered a period of a few days he eyed it with an uncomfortable suspicion. After one of these blanks was the following brief entry, which struck him with a new significance: "Am feeling very worried. What a fool I seem to be making of myself. Have an impulse to clear out of the country and start life afresh. But perhaps I had better not. It might —"

And here the entry broke off abruptly.

"Now, what does *that* mean?" queried John to himself, his brow puckered in perplexity. "When I read that before I simply put it down to a momentary twinge of conscience at his idle, careless life, the sort of feeling he got in a more marked degree later on. The unfinished entry I attributed to some chance interruption, and he either forgot to complete it, or didn't trouble to do so. But now, suppose this was written just after he was at Bedford?"

"And yet, on the other hand, just as the chap seems to have refrained from making any reference to his ever being at Bedford, would he be likely to say anything about feeling awfully worried and contemplating doing a bunk if that were due to some crime he had committed? Hanged if I know what to make of it all."

John's reflections were interrupted at this stage by the arrival of a post card which his landlady brought up to him. He glanced at it eagerly, with a vague premonition of further trouble. It read as

follows: "Shall be giving you a look up this afternoon. Want to see you most particularly. Yours ever, Dick Dashmead."

"That's it! Just what I thought," muttered John to himself. "Here's this confounded 'Dick D.' sure enough. Wants to see me most particularly, too. Of course, that means he wants to tap me for another half-quid — perhaps more. Upon my word, these callers are a downright nuisance. And this chap is a special danger to me, because we're such close 'pals' — at least, he imagines we are. He's simply bound to tumble to my imposture. Hang it all, I shall be back on that blessed Embankment again if I don't look out, and a nice little income of £150 a year will go to some undeserving charity." And with a muttered "Damn this Dick D.," he tore the offending post card into little bits and flung them in the waste-paper basket.

"So much for Dick D." he said to himself. "I *won't* see him at any price. I've got to choke him off somehow or other, and the best way of doing that will be to offend him. Send him off in a blooming huff. That's the game. He'll guess I've got tired of obliging him with these frequent small loans."

There was a look of decision in his face as he rang the bell for Mrs. Woodford.

"I am expecting Mr. Dashmead shortly," he said when that lady appeared. "Will you kindly tell him that I regret I cannot see him?"

That was all; and he stood looking at Mrs. Woodford in a way that was intended to imply that he had reasons of his own for not desiring to continue

his acquaintance with the gentleman in question.

Mrs. Woodford was clearly surprised at this injunction.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," she said after a moment's hesitation, "but would you wish me to give Mr. Dashmead any—er—any explanation?" And she looked at John enquiringly, as much as to say, "Surely, you can't quite mean this?"

John, however, was quite unmoved.

"No explanation is necessary, thank you, Mrs. Woodford," he said decisively. "Mr. Dashmead will no doubt take the hint."

Mrs. Woodford regarded her lodger with an expression of sympathetic concern, for she was a kindly soul in spite of her somewhat martyrlike airs. She said nothing, however, as she withdrew, though an eloquent sigh escaped her. With Mrs. Woodford a sigh fell little short of an actual comment, and in this instance it was doubtless intended to convey her impression that her lodger's unlooked-for rebuff of his usually most welcome visitor was but a symptom of his present ailment, concerning the nature of which Mrs. Woodford had such unpleasant recollections herself.

"I must leave her to imagine we've had a row," was John's reflection when his landlady had withdrawn. "She's evidently very surprised at my refusal to see the fellow. I hope to goodness she succeeds in getting rid of him. If not, I shall have to find a way of doing so myself. And I will, by Gad! I wonder, by the way, whether he knows about the trips to Bedford?" And his thoughts

reverted again to his extraordinary interview with Benjamin Creek.

What could have been the crime which his double had apparently committed? Everything Creek had said seemed to point unmistakably to a foul and deliberate murder, and his very way of speaking about it had appeared to imply that, as between a couple of intimate friends, there could be no question of denial. Yet John found it difficult to believe that the young man into whose shoes he had stepped could ever have been a party to so vile a deed. It seemed altogether incredible.

Then a disconcerting thought struck him: Was *that* the real reason why he was so desperately anxious to change places with him? Could *that* have been in his mind when he had said so forcibly, "*I envy you your freedom*"? Viewed in that light, John was bound to admit that it was uncommonly suggestive. And yet, there had been such a straight, honest look about the fellow that he found it next to impossible to regard him as a *murderer*.

The whole affair was simply staggering and bewildering to John. The mere fact of his double ever having been on terms of intimacy with such a repulsive creature as Creek was in itself a mystery. And there could be no doubt from the whole trend of Creek's conversation that such an intimacy must have existed.

Then the idea of going to Bedford and making enquiries about the crime occurred to John. But a moment's reflection convinced him of the folly of doing anything of the kind. The risk was too obvious. Even though his double's implication might

prove to be less direct than he had been led to suppose, John realised that he might find himself in a very awkward position, and to clear himself the immediate disclosure of his impersonation would be imperative. And that was a course of action John had no intention of taking if it could possibly be avoided.

He was still utterly at a loss how best to deal with Creek's proposal, when a vigorous rat-tat at the front door suddenly reminded him of another unwelcome caller, an interview with whom, however, he was fairly confident of avoiding.

He listened, not without some anxiety, yet hopeful that at any moment he would hear the retreating footsteps of the chagrined and discomfited "Dick D."

The sound of voices reached him, but he could not hear what was said. What a time they were! Evidently Mrs. Woodford was sticking to her guns. Perhaps, too, the chap was a bit obstinate. John reflected that these borrowing and begging fellows generally were. He was beginning to wonder whether possibly the next thing would be something in the nature of an angry and undignified altercation at the front-door, when his ears were assailed by the unexpected sound of an explosion of derisive laughter proceeding from below.

"Impudent beggar," he said to himself. But the next instant an angry flush clouded his face, for someone was bounding upstairs in a manner that convinced John that it could not by any possibility be his worthy landlady. "Confound the brazen fellow!" was his muttered imprecation as he



sprang to his feet, prepared to express his resentment at this intrusion in no measured terms.

Then the door was flung open unceremoniously, and the young man who had refused to be "choked off" burst in.

"Oh, you beauty!" was his facetious greeting. "What the devil were you up to last night? *Bilious*, indeed! A 'thick head' would be nearer the mark. Fancy, trying a yarn like that on *me*!"

And the newcomer had grabbed John by the hand almost before the latter realised it. He was a big, burly young fellow, with a pair of uncommonly mischievous eyes, and a snub nose that suggested unlimited assurance with more than a dash of impudence. Yet, in spite of a certain devil-may-care expression, it was an attractive face, if only for its abounding good humour.

John never knew exactly how it was, but somehow the moment he set eyes on Dick Dashmead he was smitten with a sense of the utter futility of attempting to rebuff the fellow. Moreover, much to his surprise, he felt drawn towards him rather than otherwise, and it struck him that it might after all be wiser to let matters take their own course instead of deliberately seeking a means of offending one whose friendship might possibly prove useful. There were obvious risks, but there was that in Dick Dashmead's free-and-easy manner and blunt good humour which inspired John with a sense of confidence and made the rôle of "bosom pal" seem less hazardous than it had done.

As for Dick Dashmead, it was manifest that he had as yet noticed nothing more in John's appear-

ance or bearing towards himself than was consistent with his conception of a "thick head," for he had already flung himself into the armchair and was coolly helping himself to a cigar.

"Well," he said as he proceeded to light up, "to come to the point—for I wanted to see you particularly. Tell me, you dissipated wreck, what's the extent of my present indebtedness to you?"

John started slightly. This sounded ominously like the prelude to a request for a further small loan, and he was a trifle taken aback at the celerity with which his visitor got to business.

"I can't say off hand," he replied guardedly, after a moment's hesitation, and in a tone which was intended to be discouraging.

"How unbusinesslike you are," said Dick with amusing self-complacency. "You ought to make a note of these things. . . . Well, I know it can't be less than five pounds, and I rather think it must be five-pounds-ten. Anyhow, my Uncle has sent me a 'tenner' in response to my pathetic appeal for a little financial assistance, and as I never expected he would spring more than a 'fiver' I thought it was a chance for me to settle up with you. Good of the old buck, wasn't it?"

"Very," assented John warmly, considerably surprised at this turn of events. He began to think he had somewhat misjudged 'Dick D.,' who was already counting out the money from a pocketful of gold and silver.

"There you are," he said cheerily. "We'll give you the benefit of the doubt and call it five-pounds-ten, though you don't deserve it for being so in-

fernally unbusinesslike. You had better take it while I have it," he added with comical emphasis.

Though John had not the remotest idea what the amount ought to be, he told a lie with the utmost alacrity. "No, I remember now quite well," he said, "it's only five pounds." And with a brief but cordial expression of thanks he handed back a half-a-sovereign. Dick, however, was disposed to demur at this, but John over-ruled him, and the matter dropped.

For a few moments Dick pulled at his cigar in silence, while John, anxious to render his resemblance to that young man's "bosom pal" as complete as possible, deliberately loaded and lit up his double's favourite calabash pipe.

"What about the thick head?" queried Dick in a tone of sudden interest. "Where did you get it? I thought you had done with all that sort of thing now you're engaged, you unmitigated humbug."

A somewhat abusive form of raillery was characteristic of Dick Dashmead, but its obvious good humour robbed it of any sting.

"So I have," said John with plausible emphasis. "It's due to other causes," he went on dejectedly, "worry — disappointment. You can guess I must be feeling pretty rotten this afternoon to have been disinclined to see even your good self." And he turned to his visitor with an expression that clearly invited sympathy. Dick whistled softly.

"Worry, disappointment, eh?" he repeated meaningly. "I think I can guess the trouble. Awfully sorry, old man. That girl has thrown you up, of course?"

John smiled faintly in spite of himself.

"No, she hasn't," he said grimly. "The trouble is — I — *I wish she would!*"

Dick nearly dropped his cigar in his astonishment. "Crikey!" he exclaimed. "So the boot's on the other leg, eh? Well, I'm jiggered. What's wrong with the girl, then? Did the money prove a myth?"

It was perhaps a somewhat brutal question, in the circumstances, but John took no offence at it.

"No, I have no reason to doubt her *bona fides* in any way," he replied simply. "My disappointment was over her appearance."

"Her *appearance!* What, after that photo?"

"Yes."

Dick regarded his friend with frank incredulity. "Oh, you're a jolly sight too particular, too exacting," he blurted out. "But tell me all about it from the start. What happened when you met her in the Park?"

"I caught a glimpse of her and went home again."

Dick's face was a study in astonishment, but John went on without waiting for any comment.

"The next morning I received a very nice letter from her. She generously attributed my failure to keep the appointment to sudden illness, and I confess I was touched at the utter absence of any word of vexation or reproach, notwithstanding the fact that she had waited a solid two hours for me. I felt that I had treated her shabbily — that I had been too hasty in my judgment of her, and that

the right thing for me to do was to go and see her in her own home."

"So I should say," broke in Dick emphatically. "But what a blooming changeable, erratic beggar you are! . . . So out you trotted to Ilford — and probably quite keen on it again, eh?"

"Well, anyway, I went. Sent her a wire to say I was coming, and regretting that I had been too unwell —"

"Oh, you fibber! Go on."

"And I must say they received me very decently. Seemed to take to me right away. Indeed, the girl's mother, actually gave me a hint when I left that I might bring an engagement ring with me this afternoon."

"But were you still disappointed in the girl's appearance?" queried Dick mischievously.

"Hopelessly and absolutely."

"What about her feelings towards yourself?"

"Intensely affectionate," said John sadly.

Dick appeared to think for a moment. Then he gave vent to a disconcerting explosion of laughter. "Upon my word," he said, "it really is very funny."

"Very *awkward* — for me," said John shortly, a trifle nettled at his friend's boisterous amusement.

"Yes, but when you remember what an infernal hurry you were in, only a fortnight or so ago, to get engaged to this girl whom you had never seen, you must admit there's a decidedly humorous side to the situation when, after your very first interview with her, you should be racking your brains — as you doubtless are — to find a way out of it.

Didn't I tell you — but there, I don't want to rub it in. What are you going to do?"

"Hanged if I know," was the gloomy response. "Get out of it the best way I can, I suppose. But I'm afraid it may be a tedious process."

"And possibly an expensive one, too," was Dick's cheering comment. "Best see the job through now you've started on it, I should say. From what you tell me," he went on airily, "the girl's really all right, though you don't realise it. The mere fact that her appearance doesn't quite come up to your pre-conceived picture of her goes for nothing. You'll get used to that — adjust yourself to it, so to speak. See?"

John rejected this plausible theory with scorn. "What's the good of talking like that?" he said with a hint of impatience. "My mind is made up. I've got to find a way out of it somehow or other. The question is — *how?*"

Dick puffed meditatively at his cigar for a few moments in silence. Then a whimsical smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"Looks as if I shall have to come to the rescue again," he said.

John started. Not only at the unlooked-for prospect of his friend being able to assist him in the matter, but equally at the implication that such assistance had been rendered on a former occasion. What did it mean? His interview with Benjamin Creek had left his mind a ready prey to all manner of needless suspicions concerning his double's past. For a moment, he was in danger of betraying his ignorance.

"How — how do you mean?" he stammered awkwardly.

The hearty laugh with which Dick received the question was in some measure reassuring.

"Surely — surely," said that young man mockingly, "you've not had so many entanglements that you've forgotten your little flirtation with that Dulwich damsel of whom you tired so quickly, and whom I, at your entreaty, took on for a time — until she tired of me?"

"Oh, of course I remember all about that," said John hurriedly and with a somewhat forced smile. "But you don't seriously suggest that you can take my place in this instance?"

"Why not?" queried Dick coolly. "Fact is, old man," he went on with a sudden burst of confidence, "you're not the only one who's been badly hit by that photo. Of course, I couldn't tell you that before, but now that you have confessed your own disappointment and declared your intention of backing out by hook or by crook — well, I tell you straight I should very much like to meet the original myself. And it doesn't strike me as such a hopeless project that, between us, we might induce the young lady to transfer her affections from you to me. Eh?"

Though the proposal sounded to John as impracticable as it was audacious, he could not withhold a certain eagerness at the bare possibility of a way out of his dilemma.

"It would be all right *if* it could be worked," he said dubiously, "but I don't see how it very well could be. Besides, I'm afraid it's a foregone con-

clusion that you would yourself be disappointed in the girl. And that would knock the whole thing on the head."

"Now don't start throwing difficulties in the way, you miserable, low-spirited wretch," said Dick with exaggerated vehemence. "I can see how it could be worked, if you can't. And as for the chance of my being disappointed, you forget I'm not so infernally exacting in my requirements as you are. Seems to me, she'd make a most desirable match for me."

John could not help smiling at his friend's air of conviction. "And how do you propose to work it?" he enquired blandly.

"The first thing will be for you to introduce me to the family. I think you said you're going out there this afternoon? Well, drop them a delicate hint that you'd like them to know your bosom pal, Dick Dashmead — quite a natural thing to do, by the way — and it's ten to one they'll give you an invitation to bring him along. They may even suggest to-morrow afternoon. The sooner the better, so far as I'm concerned. Anyhow, I'll give you a look up in the morning on the chance."

John thought for a moment. Perhaps, after all, the thing might be worked. It was certain that Miss Knotts would not find him a very ardent lover, and there was just the possibility that she might, in turn, cool somewhat towards him. In which case, the enterprising and resourceful Dick Dashmead, having obtained his introduction, might, if he still had the inclination, find a means of winning her favours. It occurred to John that his friend



was probably not unmindful of the young lady's fortune when he spoke of her as a desirable match.

"I'll see what I can do, old man, when I'm out there this afternoon," he said.

"That's right. I feel sure they'll give you an invitation for me if you work it properly. And look here, you had better find a way of dodging that engagement ring for a few days, hadn't you? It might complicate matters, otherwise."

"Yes, I'll manage that somehow."

"Good!" And Dick rose to go, evidently well pleased with himself.

For a few moments he stood looking down at John in mingled amusement and commiseration. Then a half-puzzled look came into his eyes, and John, returning his gaze with outward calm, became conscious that his friend's scrutiny had suddenly become more critical. "Upon my word, old chap," Dick went on with some show of concern, "I think you must be taking this little love affair too much to heart. Hanged if it hasn't left its mark on you already! Now I come to look straight, slap-bang into you — you extraordinary conglomeration of humbug and romance — you don't look the same fellow. You don't, indeed. Lord-love-a-duck, what's the use of taking things so seriously?"

Though the very candour of Dick's remarks made it obvious to John that his imposture was not even suspected, he felt distinctly uncomfortable for a few moments. Yet it struck him that it was, after all, not surprising that one so intimately acquainted with the original John Rutland as Dick undoubtedly was should be conscious of a certain

difference in his appearance. The wonder to him was that the difference was not, in the circumstances, more apparent, and he reflected that it was a rare bit of luck that his friend was so ready to attribute what he regarded as his altered appearance to the ravages of a disappointing love episode.

John's nerve was admirable, and he betrayed none of the uneasiness that he felt.

"I don't wonder that you think me altered," he said grimly. "So would you be if you had been through what I have in the last two or three days." And he purposely assumed an air of tragic dejection.

Dick clapped him playfully on the shoulder. "Tut, tut, you old down-in-the-dumps," he said light-heartedly. "Don't you worry yourself about the matter. Wait till *I* begin to make love to the young lady. I'll have her off your hands in no time. Bye-bye, till to-morrow."

And with a final hearty slap on the shoulder he took his departure.

## CHAPTER VIII

### JOHN IS HARD-PRESSED

It was characteristic of Benjamin Creek to bestow considerable attention on the details of his personal appearance—though with a careful avoidance of any showy effect—on all the occasions of his interviews with clients. Creek's clients, it is perhaps superfluous to explain, were his victims, but Creek, with a perverted sense of humour, preferred the more euphemistic appellation, and generally spoke of them in that way in his confidential intercourse with certain kindred spirits.

Whether his practice of paying much heed to his appearance on the occasion of a forthcoming interview was intended as a delicate compliment to the person who stood in the unenviable position of "client," or was merely a matter of general expediency, is a point with which we need not concern ourselves, except perhaps to remark that if the former were the case it was a compliment which was invariably lost on the luckless "client."

Thus it happened that on the eventful Tuesday morning on which he had arranged to pay his second visit to John Rutland, Creek might have been seen, in the seclusion of his modest "fourth-floor-back" in a Pimlico lodginghouse, assiduously

polishing a pair of boots, a task to which he devoted an amount of energy that would have earned him distinction as a professional shoe-black. Then he turned his attention to other details of his attire, the selection of clean—if somewhat frayed—linen, the careful adjustment of a sober black tie, and the painstaking brushing of a neat but well-worn lounge suit.

The achievement of an outward appearance of respectability, with yet a subtle, underlying hint of a need for an economy of which there was no cause for shame, was a fine art with Benjamin Creek. Hence, though he made a parade of linen that had obviously faced too often the vigorous attentions of the laundress, he took the greatest care that he was well-groomed and brushed, and that not even the trace of a day's growth of beard appeared upon his lean, cadaverous face.

"Lord! what a different figure I could cut to this if I only chose," he muttered with a queer grin as he surveyed himself on the morning in question. "But it wouldn't pay me. No flash togs for my game, but just a general air of quiet respectability.

"And now for the judicious 'tapping' of my latest client. I don't think there's much doubt but what he will have raised that £25, by hook or by crook. A chap in his position can always be counted on to raise that amount at a pinch—that is, if the pinch is sufficiently desperate. And I flatter myself I've seen to that. Ha-ha!"

And Creek smiled to himself significantly as he picked up his hat and gloves. There was an air of quiet confidence and self-satisfaction about him this

morning, for the man prided himself in no small measure on his depth of cunning. It was his secret boast that that cunning, coupled with his knowledge of human nature, had enabled him to pursue thus far his hazardous calling — or profession, as he was pleased to term it — without once coming into conflict with the law. True, there had been two or three uncommonly close shaves, but Creek's nerve had been equal to those occasions and had pulled him through unscathed.

In this particular case he felt that he had spun his web with consummate skill and had made the most of the quite unusual circumstances. A clumsier hand at the game, he told himself, would have disclosed his knowledge of his victim's secret and extorted money under threats of exposure. His own pose in the matter, he argued with much self-complacency, was little short of a flash of genius, and the fruits of that inspiration seemed likely to prove highly satisfactory.

Having made his way to the Tube station at Charing Cross, Creek bought a morning paper with which to beguile the time during the journey to Highgate. Then seating himself in a "smoker," he lit a cigarette and proceeded to glance casually at the news of the day.

Creek's interest in current topics was very limited, but he made a practice of scanning the police-court news on the chance of any of his acquaintances figuring therein. Whenever this happened, the contemplation of their predicament, by emphasizing his own immunity, caused him a kind of gloating satisfaction. "Bungling fool," he would

mutter to himself. "Serves him right. Never ought to have taken up with this game. Hasn't got the brains. No imagination, no *finesse*," and so on, all in a strain of indirect self-commendation.

But Creek's vanity on the score of his own cleverness and cunning was not destined to be thus tickled on the morning in question, and he was about to cast the paper aside when his keen eye caught sight of a name that was familiar to him, in a brief and inconspicuously placed paragraph recording a suicide. It stated merely that on the previous evening a well-dressed young man was seen to leap on to the parapet of Waterloo Bridge and jump into the river; that his body was subsequently recovered by the river police; and that letters and papers found on him led to the conclusion that he was a Mr. Walter Powell of 99a Abbey Road, St. John's Wood, London.

Doubtless, there were some to whom that brief, unadorned account of an all too common tragedy would come with a shock of horror; perhaps to someone it would mean a broken heart. But it would have been obvious to the most casual observer that it aroused no such sentiment in the breast of Benjamin Creek.

The changed expression of his face betrayed no horror, no hint of chastened sorrow at the tragic fate of one whom he had known; one, indeed, whom he had seen but a few short hours before that mad plunge had ended all. Creek's near-set eyes blazed for a few moments with an expression that was by no means pleasant to behold, a look that suggested somehow a wild beast robbed suddenly of his prey.

"Curse the fool," he muttered savagely to himself. "So he's given me the slip after all, has he? One of my best paying clients, too, curse him! And I'd just got him nicely primed, as I thought for another £50. Of all the infernal slices of ill-luck — Bah, it'll go badly with the bogus John Rutland if he's not ready to shell out this morning. I'm in no mood for haggling, after that."

And for the rest of the journey to East Finchley the crafty face of the specialist in blackmail wore a sullen, brooding look that boded ill indeed for the next object of his attentions.

Meanwhile, that young man, though he awaited the arrival of Benjamin Creek with a degree of anxiety and concern that would doubtless have been highly gratifying to the latter, was yet in somewhat better spirits than might have been expected. This was partly due to the quite unlooked-for success which had attended his diplomatic efforts to effect the introduction of his friend Dick Dashmead to the Knotts' household. Indeed, both Mr. and Mrs. Knotts, little suspecting his motive, had extended a most cordial invitation to him to bring his friend out to Ilford on the Sunday, and on that eventful occasion their hospitality had left nothing to be desired. Moreover, Dick, with his light-hearted, easy-going, yet always well-bred manner, had produced an excellent impression, and although John was at a loss to see how his deliverance from his irksome engagement could be achieved, Dick's confidence on that score infused him with some measure of hope.

Then again — and not a little to John's astonish-

ment — Dick had apparently experienced no rude shock of disillusionment on his first encounter with Miss Knotts, though this may have been partly due to John's admirable forethought in warning him to be prepared for a bitter disappointment. At all events, Dick declared that except for the slight cast in the young lady's eye — which he characterised as only a minor defect — he considered her appearance rather prepossessing than otherwise, and he confirmed his eagerness to take John's place in the young lady's affections if this could be accomplished. How far his judgment might have been influenced by the consideration of the young lady's fortune was a point with which John did not concern himself.

Dick had confided to John that, now that the introduction had been duly effected, he was going to make a practice of taking seemingly casual strolls in Valentine's park, where he stood something more than a sporting chance of encountering Miss Knotts. And upon John suggesting that this was a device which might be easily seen through, he had replied, airily, that he would know well enough how to make his appearance there seem perfectly natural.

As to the important matter of drawing his double's monthly allowance, here again John's luck had seen him through successfully. He had, with not a little trepidation, duly presented himself, on the Monday morning, at the office of Messrs. Shark, Cordfast & Co., of Lincoln's Inn Fields, the solicitors for the estate from which his income was derived, and had asked — in accordance with the in-



structions given to him on entering his new rôle — for Mr. Spring, the cashier of the firm. And that gentleman had received him with such an air of easy familiarity that his secret misgivings lest his imposture should be discovered were quickly dispelled. The interview had been over in less than two minutes, and Mr. Spring — who had declared he was “up to his eyes in work” — had barely glanced at the receipt which John had signed in exchange for the cheque for £12-10/- which was handed to him. There had been no awkward or embarrassing questions concerning events of which he had no knowledge, no doubting glances or hard looks directed at him; only a little good-natured chaff from Mr. Spring — who had known the original John Rutland almost as long as that young man could remember — and a half-friendly, half-formal nod from one or two of the clerks. In short, his visit had in every respect been treated in precisely that matter-of-fact spirit which John had been led to expect, yet had somehow dreaded might not prove to be the case.

And now, on the Tuesday morning, he was speculating uneasily on his chances of getting rid, for good and all, of Benjamin Creek by the offer of a sum of Ten pounds in cash. Only that entirely unlooked-for five pounds from Dick, in repayment of past loans, enabled him to make this offer, but he had an uncomfortable foreboding that Creek might protest that it was not sufficient to place him in a position to take that very-much-to-be-desired trip to Australia. What was he to do then? *And suppose Creek should cut up rough?* This latter

was a thought which had obtruded itself with peculiar persistence and increasing force ever since his interview with Creek last Friday.

But a certain latent trait of dogged obstinacy in John's nature caused him to face this unpleasant contingency in a spirit of some rebellion. So far he would go, if it would be the means of ridding himself of this odious and insinuating creature who claimed a close acquaintance with him — so far, but no further. He had no intention of leaving himself penniless in order to meet Creek's requirements. If ten pounds would not suffice, then Creek would have to look elsewhere for assistance or do without. After all, his own conscience was clear, and he still found it hard to believe, however suspicious some of the circumstances might be, that his double could ever have committed such a dastardly crime as that which Creek's conversation had implied. That something must have happened which was not to his credit, that there might even be some dark page in his past life, John was reluctantly compelled to regard as only too probable, but that it could involve the foul and deliberate murder of a young woman seemed inconceivable.

None the less, and in spite of himself, there were moments when John could not help contemplating the possibility. The sinister suggestion would impinge itself on his sub-conscious mind and create a tumult in the whispering chambers of his imagination. And at such times, seek as he would to argue the dread thing away on the score of utter improbability, there remained ever the undeniable and extremely disquieting fact of Creek's intimate

knowledge of that secret "something" in his double's past.

"I hope to heaven that ten pounds will be enough to get the fellow out of the country, that's all," he muttered to himself as he glanced nervously at his wrist-watch. "Well, the beggar will be here in a few minutes now, so it won't be long before I know my fate. Somehow, I feel that a lot may turn on this interview. There's no doubt the chap wants to clear out if he possibly can, and if only he does so, I confess it will be a tremendous load off my mind. Whatever it was that happened at Bedford, I feel that the fellow is a source of danger to me. Indeed, all his talk pointed unmistakably that way.

"Yes, with him once fairly packed off to Australia I can give my mind to the difficult and delicate task of wriggling out of my engagement with that girl. It sounds rather brutal, but it's got to be done somehow or other. I think I've done pretty well up to now as regards my attitude towards her — not too demonstrative and yet not so cold as to precipitate trouble. I hate myself for this wretched part I have to play, but I honestly feel I've been let in for a good deal more than I had bargained for. Still, there is just the possibility that she may cool off towards me, and if she does I really believe that uncommonly enterprising fellow Dick Dashmead will stand a chance with her. I could see he made a very good impression last Sunday with all of them, and I know he intends losing no time in trying to effect one or two of those seem-

ingly casual encounters with her in Valentine's Park. I wonder how she'll take it?"

John was roused suddenly from these reflections by a knock at the front-door, and a moment later he heard Katie, the small maid-of-all-work, scurrying along the hall to open the door. Usually, Mrs. Woodford, or her daughter Gladys, attended to any callers, but they were both out this morning, a chance circumstance for which John was not altogether sorry in view of Creek's expected visit. He did not wish them to have any ground for supposing that that ill-visaged, if respectably attired, person was likely to be a frequent caller on him.

He was conscious of a curious sense of nervousness as he listened for the sound of Creek's ingratiating voice. . . . Yes, it was he, right enough. There could be no mistaking those stilted, artificial tones.

John lit a cigarette and assumed an air of studied unconcern that was far from expressing his true feelings. He expected in a moment to hear the maid coming upstairs to announce his visitor.

But Katie, who had not long been in service and was of the somewhat rough-and-ready type of maid, had her own ideas of how to deal with callers who interrupted her in her multifarious duties. Her expedient had at least the merit of being a time-saving device. "Straight upstairs, please. First door on the right," John heard her say briskly and in a voice that suggested latent irritation. Then followed a soft, almost stealthy tread on the stairs, and a light rap on the door of John's room.

"Come in!" John was lolling indolently in an

easy-chair with the morning's paper in his hands as Creek entered.

It was part of what might be termed Creek's stock-in-trade that he possessed, in no small measure, the power of dissembling his feelings. Or rather, as Creek himself would have put it, the attribute in question was a highly important branch of his profession, and one to which he had paid particular attention.

Consequently, as he opened the door of John's room, his features assumed a drawn, haggard expression suggestive of a mind that was racked with anxiety and fear. He seemed to have aged visibly in the last few days, whilst his whole manner was furtive in the extreme.

John was somewhat taken aback at the change in his visitor's appearance, and drew his own conclusions. It was manifest that things had not gone well with Creek, and John had an uncomfortable foreboding that he was about to hear of some fresh development concerning that mysterious episode at Bedford in which he was supposed to have been involved.

Creek's first words confirmed this suspicion.

"Have you been 'shadowed' since I was last here?" he enquired breathlessly, after only the most perfunctory greeting.

"Not that I'm aware of," said John in a tone of some surprise, yet careful to conceal the not unnatural concern which the question caused him.

"Not that you're aware of!" echoed Creek with a hint of exasperation. "Heavens, you *do* take it coolly. I suppose you have scarcely even troubled

to look round in case anyone has been dogging your steps?"

"Can't say I have. What's the use of worrying?"

And John blew a graceful ring of smoke from his cigarette with well-feigned indifference. He was wondering uneasily what new danger threatened him, yet he dared not evince an undue eagerness to know. He had to remember that he was supposed to know all about it, and he felt that his safest course lay in assuming an attitude of callous unconcern, rather than be betrayed into asking questions which might imperil the secret of his imposture.

Creek regarded him narrowly, a curious light flickering for an instant in his cunning eyes.

"When you say what's the use of worrying, do you mean that you regard your chance of escape as hopeless? Because — well, you should never say die till the rope is round your neck, you know."

Apparently, Creek was endeavouring to be reassuring, but there was something in the suspicion of a leer which accompanied his words that made John loathe him more than ever. Moreover, he felt that this was by no means a pleasant construction to have placed upon his assumption of indifference, and for a moment he was at a loss for a suitable reply. Creek, however, with an appearance of understanding his embarrassment, went on.

"You mustn't despair, old man. You mustn't get into that 'what's-the-use-of-worrying' state," he urged with an earnestness that was peculiarly rasping to the listener. "They haven't got you *yet*,

and I think I can make a pretty shrewd guess why they haven't. *They want to pump me first*, so as to make sure of their ground. And my sudden disappearance from Bedford has baulked them — for the time being, at all events. That's why I was anxious to know if they had contrived by any means to trace you and were keeping you under observation."

"I think you may take it from me that I have not been shadowed," said John quietly. "I can scarcely think I could have failed to notice it if I had been."

"You don't know what a relief it is to me to hear you say that," declared Creek, speaking as though an immense load had been suddenly removed from his mind. "You cannot think how I have dreaded lest I should be too late. For it just means this, you see. Up to now you are safe, and once I am out of the country and all trace of me gone, I don't very well see how they can bring the — er — job," — here Creek shuddered — "home to you. It's altogether such a peculiar case, as you, of course, know better than anyone. On the other hand, if by any means they already had you under observation my call here would be duly noted, and you can bet your bottom dollar they would certainly take care not to lose sight of me until the Bedford police had had an opportunity of interviewing me. Of course, as you know, I have nothing to fear for myself, and they would have no ground for any interference with my movements, but I should be too valuable as a witness for the prosecution for them to let me out of their sight. . . . Good lord!" added the spe-

cialist in blackmail, giving rein to his ever fertile imagination, "I can just fancy old What's-his-name, the Chief of the Bedford police, coming to London himself to interrogate me! You know the chap I mean — clean-shaven and piercing eyes, and as keen as mustard."

Creek, who not only had no acquaintance with the Bedford police but had never been to that town in his life, was mightily pleased with himself at this touch of realism, and he took advantage of John's momentarily averted face to indulge in a sly grin of secret satisfaction at what he judged must be his victim's discomfiture, even though that young man still persisted in his assumption of unconcern.

It was obvious to Creek that the bogus John Rutland's fears must be two-fold: that he was in danger of finding himself charged with a crime he had never committed and of which he knew nothing, but of which he must naturally suppose the original John Rutland had been guilty; or that the secret of his imposture must be confessed, with its consequent banishment to his former life of hardship and privation, a contingency which the crafty human vampire rightly guessed must be peculiarly distasteful to his victim.

For himself, John was hoping more devoutly than ever that the offer of ten pounds which he was about to make would prove sufficient to enable this highly dangerous "confidant" to clear out of the country. The picture presented to him of the police interrogating this fellow who knew so much concerning the original John Rutland's past — or at



all events concerning a certain dark episode in that past — inspired him with a dread of what the consequences to himself might be. He remembered Creek's lachrymose expressions of fear and doubt on the score of his ability to conceal the truth if such an interview should have to be faced, and his protestations of horror at the prospect of ultimately finding himself in the witness-box forced to bear evidence against his "pal."

It may have been that Creek was thinking of this, too, for there was a sudden quivering of his thin lips and a nervous clasping and unclasping of his long, bony fingers suggestive of inward emotion.

"It's all very dreadful — very terrible," he jerked out brokenly. "You must forgive me, Rutland, for thinking of myself for the moment. But, for a chap like me — you know what a home-bird I've always been — it's an awful wrench to tear oneself away from those who are nearest and dearest to one. And without — without a word of farewell, too. Simply to vanish — probably never to be heard of again. Oh, my poor old — poor old mother — whom I love more than —"

For a moment Creek was unable to proceed. It was palpable that he was on the brink of tears in spite of obvious efforts at self-mastery.

But John was perhaps a shrewder judge of human nature than Creek gave him credit for. It struck him that his visitor's grief was a trifle too melodramatic to be genuine, a suspicion which intensified the natural loathing he already felt towards him. None the less, he realised that he must curb his feelings, and act precisely as he judged

his misguided double would have acted had he remained to face the consequences of his wrong-doing.

For a brief space he watched the shaking, and now sobbing form before him. He could not see the face, for it was hidden behind a pair of bony hands, the knuckles of which were pressed into the cavernous sockets of the eyes in a manner that was, to John, almost ludicrously suggestive of a censured school-boy shedding "crocodile" tears.

Then, with an effort, he forced himself to express the sympathy he was so far from feeling.

"Yes, Creek, old chap"—the words came somewhat awkwardly—"I know it's hard lines. But you must try to bear up bravely and look forward to the future. Once you are out in Australia a new life will be open before you, and I'm sure you'll soon shake down happily enough."

Creek groaned, his head still buried in his hands. "Oh, my poor mother. My poor—old—mother. To think—But I mustn't give way like this"—looking up suddenly with a sickly leer on his face. "It's really very weak of me. Rutland, old man, I am grateful to you for your kind words of sympathy and encouragement, and I'll try to face my ordeal bravely, and to live for the future yet. Perhaps, after all, my new surroundings abroad will help me in a measure to forget the anguish of my parting from the dear ones at home."

Creek appeared to be pulling himself together. The truth was he felt he had done about enough acting and that it was time to get to business. Indeed, he was a little disappointed, having regard to all the circumstances of this peculiar case, that the

bogus John Rutland had not ere this come to the point and "shelled out" in his anxiety to be rid of him, and he was beginning to suspect that this might indicate evasive intentions, or at least a desire to compromise. And Creek was in no mood for anything of that sort this morning. That announcement in the paper of the suicide of his most paying "client" had put him in an ugly temper and had fired the vampire qualities of his mind with the single purpose of holding fast to the luckless victim he had just netted.

"By the way, Rutland, my best of old pals," he went on in a voice that was somehow a little less cordial than the words would have appeared to justify, "I suppose I need scarcely ask if you have managed to raise that little loan for me?" And he glanced across at John in a way that seemed to imply a consciousness of putting a somewhat unnecessary question.

Something in the fellow's manner — perhaps it was a certain faint hint of veiled hostility — filled John with a sense of the futility of the offer he was about to make, and whatever hopes he may have entertained on this score melted before that intuitive warning. But he was not one to waver or beat about the bush, and he answered with a directness and candour that gave no clue to his forebodings of impending trouble.

"The best I can do is ten pounds," he said simply. "If that will be sufficient — with what you may have of your own — to enable you to pay your passage money to Australia, you can have it at once. But I can't go beyond that."

Creek's green-tinted eyes seemed to narrow suddenly and an ominous glint crept into them. So, after all, this young fool, whom he had so completely in his power, was going to try and get rid of him at something under half-price, was he? Not if he knew it! thought Creek to himself. The very coolness of the offer, as he regarded it, riled him and added to the secret irritation with which John's still unruffled demeanour inspired him.

For Creek, it might be said, preyed on panic, and indeed prided himself on his ability to produce that condition of mind on the part of those whom Fate brought within the meshes of his net. Yet here was one who, whatever his inward perturbation might be, evinced no sign of fear, and actually had the cool effrontery to try to beat him down in price.

For a few moments he looked at John with an expression which was intended to be merely one of pained surprise—the kind of surprise which one friend may show towards another at an unexpected and undeserved rebuff. But the wolfish temper that was inherent to the fellow gleamed menacingly from his eyes in a manner that gave the lie direct to any gentler sentiments he would fain have assumed.

“I don't think you can quite mean that, Rutland,” he said in a curiously constrained voice. “I can't believe you would expect me to make the terrible sacrifice that I am making for a paltry ‘tenner.’ Even if that were enough to enable me to book my steerage passage to Australia—which it isn't—it stands to reason I must have something over when I get there—a stranger in a distant

land. And, bear in mind, it is for *you*, and *your safety*, that I am making this huge sacrifice."

Creek was making a final effort to obtain by persuasion that which he was fully resolved to obtain by the "screwing" process if the other method failed him. Half-mechanically, he even went so far as to apply his handkerchief to the corner of his eye, though the entire absence of any need for this proceeding was so patent as to render the action almost farcical.

John rose abruptly from his seat, a sudden feeling upon him that, come what might, he could no longer endure the sickening hypocrisy of this odious creature. Moreover, in spite of all that was at stake, he was beginning to feel an overmastering impulse to kick the fellow out of his room, and chance the consequences. There were limits to his endurance.

"Look here, Creek," he said bluntly. "I'm not trifling with you. I offer you ten pounds because it is the utmost I can do. If I could do better I would, but I simply can't. Now, tell me straight: is that ten pounds sufficient for your purpose, or is it not? If it isn't, then there's no object in prolonging this interview."

There was an unmistakable air of decision about John now, even a hint of defiance. Creek's hypocrisy was manifest to him, and he secretly dubbed the vanished John Rutland a consummate fool for having ever allowed such a repulsive specimen of humanity to regard himself as his friend. What could possibly have brought about such a relation-

ship between them baffled his comprehension more than ever, but for the moment his dominant thought was to make it perfectly plain to this self-styled friend that it would be hopeless to look for any increase of an offer which already represented the limit of his available resources.

To Creek, in his present ill-humour, John's blunt intimation that it was ten pounds or nothing was as a red rag to a bull, and it was with difficulty that he restrained his resentment at this display of opposition on the part of a "client" whom he felt he had so completely within his toils.

"So that's how you treat your old Bedford pal, is it?" he queried in a tone and manner in which it would have been difficult to detect any degree of friendly regard. "*After all that has happened, too!* Ten pounds the utmost you can do, eh? And if that's not enough — I can go."

The rôle of a trusted friend on which he had embarked had become peculiarly irksome to the blackmailer, and all his instincts clamoured now for a form of pressure scarcely consistent with that pose.

"Don't you think, my dear Rutland," he went on with a smile that was somehow a menace, and speaking with insinuating emphasis, "don't you think you are, to put it mildly, a trifle indiscreet in haggling about another fifteen pounds *when so much is at stake?* Where would *you* be, I should like to know, if I took it into my head *not* to clear out of the country but to remain comfortably at home, eh? You know as well as I do that it's a thousand to one I should be so questioned by the

police as to make your arrest inevitable. And then — ? ”

Here Creek made a dramatic gesture eloquently suggestive of a state of strangulation induced by a coil of rope being tightened about his neck, though it was quite obvious that his thoughtful solicitude had reference to John's neck and not his own.

John never knew exactly how it was, but there was something in that crude, pantomimic action expressive of a felon's death upon the gallows that inspired him with a sudden conviction — borne upon him intuitively, it may have been — that the fellow before him was telling a monstrous lie. Upon what groundwork of lesser wrongdoing this fabric of horrible innuendo might have been constructed it was impossible for him to conjecture, though the thought flashed through his mind that it was conceivable that the vanished Rutland, having committed some youthful indiscretion of which Creek had knowledge, was to have been made the victim of subsequent developments of which he was ignorant. At all events, in that swift, subtle flash of insight into human nature, which comes to all at times, though to some more than others, John instinctively divined that, whatever that regrettable episode in his double's past might have been, Creek was lying — lying in the foulest manner possible — when he went the length of imputing *murder*.

The sudden revelation brought with it such a sense of hatred and contempt towards him who cast this aspersion that John's pent-up feelings could no longer be withheld.

"You liar!" he broke out vehemently, now utterly regardless of consequences. "I've had enough of your damnable insinuations. If you don't clear out of my room instantly I'll throw you out."

"Eh?"

The blackmailer had leapt to his feet. He was white with rage, and that curious green tint in his eyes seemed to have become suddenly accentuated. All thought of the fiction of a former "pal" had vanished now before that swift-rising tide of ungovernable temper.

"*You talk like that to me!*" he hissed. "I'll soon show you it doesn't pay to quarrel with Benjamin Creek. You'll have good cause to regret it if you do, anyway. Now, you miserable young puppy," he went on in rising tones, "no more of your high talk with me. Shell out that twenty-five pounds at once — *or I'll make you!*"

"And why the devil should he shell out?"

It was no other than Mr. William Knotts, the prizefighter, who, in deep, gruff, yet perfectly matter-of-fact tones, asked this question. In the excitement of the moment his abrupt entry — which had lacked any formal announcement for the same reason as Creek's — had not been observed.

Both the young men turned in startled amazement towards the new-comer.

It would be difficult to say to whom his sudden appearance at this particular juncture was the least welcome, though for vastly different reasons. To John it suggested all manner of embarrassing possibilities, amongst which the necessity for the volun-



tary disclosure of his imposture loomed large. To the blackmailer, who instantly recognised the well-known features of the one-time champion pugilist, it suggested only one thing, the very unexpectedness of which betrayed him, for once, into an utterance least calculated to extricate him from his dangerous position. He had not the remotest doubt that his victim's apparent surprise was a mere assumption, and he secretly marvelled that he should have been able to engage the services of so formidable a "bruiser" as the famous ex-champion — a clear proof in itself that he could raise the "needful" at a pinch.

"*A trap, eh?*" he hissed venomously, his wolfish eyes darting swiftly from John to the unwelcome obtruder, and back again to John.

## CHAPTER IX

### BILLY KNOTTS TO THE RESCUE

THE ex-prizefighter was not a man to betray much surprise at anything, whatever his feelings might be. It was characteristic of him to take things with a coolness that might almost have suggested a state of preparedness for anything. Perhaps the fact that in his professional capacity he had knocked about the world for the best part of twenty years had something to do with this attribute of mind. The same circumstance may have contributed also to the development of a natural faculty for taking in a situation at a glance.

Thus it happened that as he entered the room, his giant figure framed for a moment in the doorway, there was such a complete absence on his part of the surprise which the unexpected scene that met his gaze might well have evoked, that the blackmailer's deduction of a deliberate trap was perhaps not unnatural. For a brief space, his impassive gaze surveyed the startled young men quite impartially. Then it rested in a stern, cold scrutiny on the tensely-drawn, ill-favoured features of the blackmailer, from whose last words Mr. Knotts was prompt to draw his own conclusions. Man of the world as he was, he was a tolerably sound judge of human nature, and the imprint of the born criminal did not escape him. It was obvious to him

that, by some means or other, his prospective son-in-law had got into the clutches of a human vampire of the worst type, and it occurred to him, with a sort of inward chuckle of satisfaction, that this unexpected little visit of his was likely to prove more opportune than he had anticipated. Totally unaware, as he was, of all that underlay Creek's attempt to extort money — nor, indeed, for the moment caring much on that score — he had no wish to disillusion the scoundrel of his suspicion of a trap. In Mr. Knotts' estimation the fellow stood a self-confessed blackmailer. And the ex-prizefighter had his own ideas of the best way of dealing with that particular breed of criminal.

Much to the astonishment of the young man whom he regarded as his future son-in-law, he favoured him with a very deliberate and palpable wink. It was an uncommonly knowing wink, too; a wink that seemed to say — "leave this job to me; I know exactly what to do" — and its significance quickly dawned upon John.

Then, in his own cool, masterful way, the ex-prizefighter closed the door behind him and turned the key in the lock.

"Yes," he said laconically, in that deep voice of his that somehow suggested vast lung space, "looks a bit like a trap, doesn't it?" His keen, ever-watchful eyes were upon Creek now. "Why should he," he went on with a jerk of his head towards John, "shell out?" And he strode menacingly up to the blackmailer and stood squarely before him, his great, massive jaw set in an expression of grim ferocity.

Now Creek, like most men who make a business of crime, was of an inherently suspicious turn of mind, and he never for a moment doubted that this entirely unlooked-for intervention was a cunningly laid plot to entrap him, a misconception on his part which led him to adopt a course of action which he would certainly not otherwise have pursued. It was for this reason that he instantly dismissed as futile any thought of making use of his secret knowledge of the bogus John Rutland's imposture. The blackmailer felt he had to deal with a man who had simply been paid — no doubt handsomely paid — to give him the soundest thrashing he had ever had, and to have sought to avoid that by the disclosure of his valuable secret would have been to rob himself of an asset which could still be turned to excellent account in the future. He felt, too, that it was extremely improbable that the paid "bruiser" would be in the least deterred from the due performance of his job by anything he might say concerning the young man who had engaged his services.

Consequently, as he had not the remotest intention of submitting to the chastisement designed for him, he deemed his only chance to lie in a species of physical trickery against which the prowess of the redoubtable ex-champion prizefighter might well prove of small avail — a method of defence, be it said, that had stood the blackmailer in good stead on more than one occasion in the course of his chequered career.

He backed a pace or two warily before Mr. Knotts' menacing advance, his crafty eyes — nar-

rowed now into mere slits — taking furtive measure of his formidable adversary. There was little difference in the stature of the two men, for the blackmailer was himself well over six feet, his lanky frame all sinew and muscle. Yet his slim, lithe figure contrasted strangely with the broad-chested, powerful form of the veteran prizefighter.

Benjamin Creek had been in a few tight holes in his time, yet he knew from the ominous glint of the steel-blue eyes that now met his gaze that he had never been in a tighter hole before. There was something in those stern, unflinching eyes that warned him to expect no mercy; something that even suggested a positive zest and relish for the task in hand.

But Creek had a cool nerve, fostered by experience, and it did not fail him in his present extremity.

“Why should he shell out, eh?” he said in half-contemptuous repetition of the “bruiser’s” query. “You had better ask *him* — not me!” And, still furtively observant of the commanding figure before him, he jerked his head significantly towards John.

Creek’s purpose was to divert Mr. Knotts’ attention for an instant in order that he might have an opportunity of executing one of those clever little tricks of his, the success of which in this instance he realised must be largely dependent on its unexpectedness. But it is more than doubtful if the ruse would have succeeded against the wary veteran of the prize-ring, had it not been for an angry outburst from John himself at this critical moment.

That young man was quick enough to recognise that his wisest policy in the very compromising situation in which he now found himself was to put a bold face on things. Already he half-guessed Mr. Knotts' view of the matter, and he promptly decided — little suspecting how near he was to the truth — to treat the detestable Benjamin Creek precisely as he might a common blackmailer. As to how to account for his presumed acquaintance with such a disreputable scoundrel — for Creek's semblance of respectability had vanished with the dropping of his mask — was a difficulty which he must leave for the moment. His one thought now was to get rid of the fellow as quickly as possible, and being of an independent nature, and plucky withal, he had no inclination to shelter himself behind the burly ex-prizefighter. In short, he was eager enough to do a bit of "chucking cut" on his own account.

"You lying scoundrel," he exclaimed vehemently, "get out of my room at once, or I'll throw you out." And his whole attitude proclaimed his readiness to be something more than a mere looker-on.

It was then that Mr. Knotts turned for an instant towards John. "Shut up," he growled shortly, with a half-impatient gesture. "You leave this to —"

But he never finished the sentence. This was the wily blackmailer's chance, and he seized it with a swiftness, a suddenness, that at least argued a commendable combination of mental alertness with physical adroitness. Like a flash, his foot shot up, straight for Mr. Knott's throat.

Creek had no faith in half-measures, and no scruples as to the means he employed to secure a "knock-out." Indeed, he prided himself on the rapidity and skill with which he could administer his own special throat-kick, as he was pleased to term this sample of hooliganism, a manoeuvre in which his lithe, sinuous frame assisted him in no small measure.

But he now discovered that it was one thing to play that trick with success against an average man with little or no experience of hooligan methods, and quite another when he was up against a man who, besides having spent the best part of his life in the prize-ring, had done plenty of rough-and-tumble work in his earlier days from sheer love of fighting. Moreover, Billy Knotts was a good deal less unsuspecting of the possibility of a "dirty trick" than Creek had supposed.

Quick as thought, by a dexterous backward movement he robbed Creek of his coveted knock-out kick by the fraction of an inch. Simultaneously, his long arm shot out and his hand closed like a vice over the ankle of the upraised foot. There was a mighty heave, and the blackmailer crashed heavily to the ground.

"Thought that was his game," Mr. Knotts remarked coolly as he proceeded to divest himself of his coat. "Blimey!"—with a glance towards John—"I wouldn't have missed this for something." And there was more than a hint of zest in his grim chuckle.

Then he stepped up to John, who had been too

taken aback at the suddenness of Creek's attack to attempt to interfere, even if there had been time to do so, and whispered something in his ear. "You just leave this to me, sonny, and keep your mouth shut," he said. "Clear the ring a bit."

Meanwhile, the discomfited and severely shaken Creek, still prostrate on the floor, was endeavouring beneath a semblance of insensibility to collect his scattered wits. Then he heard the sound of the shifting of furniture, and took a stealthy glance through his half-closed lids. It was at once obvious to him that the "paid bruiser" intended to carry out his job with uncommon thoroughness, and he cursed the folly that had led him at last into such a palpable trap.

Then, noting that the two men were momentarily pre-occupied, he gave a swift, furtive glance about him on the bare chance of any likely weapon being within reach.

Heavens, *the very thing!*

But — could he reach it unobserved? *If only he could!*

It was a massive poker, a long burnished bar of solid steel, barely a yard from where he lay, on which Creek gazed for an instant with such covetous intensity. With that formidable weapon once in his hand —

The burly ex-prizefighter and John were moving the table from the centre to the side of the room, where they had already placed the chairs, and Creek knew that in another moment their attention must return to him. "The scoundrel will pull round in



a jiffy," the big man was saying in a muttered undertone, "and then, my boy,"—with an audible chuckle—" *he's going through it!* "

"Is he though? Don't be too sure of that!"

With the stealth and agility of a panther, Creek had leapt to his feet and pounced upon the poker, which he now held poised menacingly above his head. There was a murderous gleam in the green-tinted eyes that blazed from his cadaverous face, now livid with passion.

The two men had just set down the table in the desired position at the further end of the room. There was a startled exclamation from John at this unexpected change in the situation, and the prizefighter wheeled sharply round.

It did not take the vanquisher of "Giant Joe" of Kentucky long to decide on his course of action in this emergency. With as little apparent regard for the poised poker as a mad bull might have shown for a broomstick, he simply charged straight in at the man who thus challenged him. The steel bar flashed downward, but a dexterous swerve in the nick of time caused the blow to fall harmlessly, and in another instant the weapon had been wrenched from Creek's grasp and flung beyond his reach.

Then followed, for the space of perhaps two minutes, such a set-to as John had never before witnessed in his life. Creek, now fairly at bay, fought with the fury of a tiger, but quick and agile as he was, and himself possessed of no mean knowledge of the fistic art, he never stood the ghost of a chance against the skilled and powerful veteran of the prize-ring. The latter knocked his man about as

and where he pleased, and with an ease that almost suggested the whole affair was sheer child's play to him. Again and again, with a gameness born of desperation, Creek lashed out savagely in return, vainly hoping to land a sufficiently staggering blow to give him a chance to administer his deadly throat-kick. But Billy Knotts' guard proved impregnable, and more than once he met these efforts with a terrific countering punch that sent Creek reeling backward.

John watched with breathless fascination the progress of the short, fierce conflict. There was something almost terrible in the grim relentlessness of the ex-prizefighter — his heavy-jowled face now, set like a sphinx — as he slogged in, right and left, at the blackmailer. Thud, thud, thud, fell the blows which he rained on the wretched Creek, whose blood-stained features were fast becoming unrecognisable, and from whose only remaining serviceable eye there gleamed such a concentration of venomous and baffled fury as made John shudder.

Then, suddenly, Billy Knotts, who had throughout the encounter fought in his characteristic half-crouching attitude, straightened to his full height. For a moment, too, he paused.

"Now, you cur," he said sternly, his great chest heaving with the violence of his exertions, "*you're going down for the count.* And may it teach you a lesson!"

Bash!

It was a "left uppercut" to the jaw, delivered with amazing swiftness and precision, that reduced the now tottering Creek to a state of total insensi-

bility. It lifted him clean off his feet and sent him crashing backwards with a force that gave convincing proof of the veteran's undiminished hitting powers.

For a few moments, Mr. Knotts, his arms akimbo, his feet outspread, stood looking down on the bruised and battered features of the blackmailer with an expression of grim satisfaction. Mr. Knotts was quite untroubled with any false sentiments, and he felt not the remotest compunction as he contemplated that prone, motionless figure with its terribly disfigured face. John meanwhile looked on in uneasy silence, his brain busily seeking the most plausible explanation he could give to account for his acquaintance with this very disreputable character.

At this juncture a timid tap at the door caused Mr. Knotts and John to exchange hasty glances.

"My landlady, no doubt," muttered the latter, secretly vexed at the good lady's untimely return. "I expect she is wondering what all the disturbance is about."

Mr. Knotts smiled grimly. "Guess it must have sounded a bit startling down below," he assented. "Hope she's not going to give you a week's notice. Anyhow, I'll square her if there's any trouble."

Then there was another timid tap, followed by the tentative turning of the handle of the locked door, which John now, without more ado, unlocked and opened.

It was, indeed, Mrs. Woodford, looking more worried and concerned than ever.

"I beg your pardon for intruding, Mr. Rutland,"

she said hurriedly and nervously, "but I thought I would let you know that that last crash nearly brought our chandelier down, and I fear it won't stand another. It's not for me," the good lady went on resignedly as she caught a glimpse of the disarranged furniture within the room, "it's not for me to interfere with your amusements so long as they are within bounds, but, if you wouldn't mind —"

Mr. Knotts had stridden to the door. There was a humorous twinkle in his not unkindly eyes as he gazed down on the harassed features of Mrs. Woodford.

"Madam," he said, "I'm sorry you've been disturbed, and I'll make good any damage that has been caused. I've had occasion to administer a thrashing to — er — a person who has made himself particularly objectionable to Mr. Rutland. Mr. Rutland, I might mention, happens to be engaged to my daughter, so that my interest in his welfare is perhaps only natural. . . . May I ask you, madam, to be good enough to send for a cab?"

Mrs. Woodford, who might have supposed she was interrupting a boisterous game of "musical chairs," or possibly some form of jumping competition, gazed in awe-struck astonishment at the ponderous figure before her. For a moment she seemed too taken aback to reply. Then, having briefly expressed her readiness to send for a cab, she withdrew with a faintly murmured, "Ah me, what goings-on, to be sure!"

Meanwhile, Creek had recovered consciousness. Though he was still dazed, and his head felt as

though it had been split by a blow from a sledgehammer, he had overheard, confusedly, something of the brief conversation that had taken place in the doorway of the room. Strangely remote and barely intelligible as the words had sounded to him in his dazed condition, there was yet one sentence which burned itself indelibly into his brain, and upon which his slowly recovering senses fastened to the exclusion of all else. "*Mr. Rutland . . . engaged to my daughter. . . . Engaged to my daughter.*"

Like the passing imprint of an evil spirit, the shadow of a dark design flickered for an instant across his bruised, disfigured face. But when, a moment later, the two men turned again to the prostrate figure, not even the quiver of an eye-lid gave evidence of returning consciousness.

"A clean enough knock-out, eh?" remarked the ex-prizefighter with a touch of professional pride, as he ran a critical eye over the motionless form at his feet.

"Good heavens! I should say so," assented John with convincing emphasis.

"Nearly always puts a man down and out, you know, that uppercut to the point of the jaw," Mr. Knotts went on musingly. "Could have let him have it at the start if I had chosen, but I wanted to give the beggar his gruelling first. And I fancy I've done so pretty effectively."

"Hadn't we better do something to bring him to?" queried John, a trifle anxiously.

"Bless you, he'll come to soon enough. But he'll feel pretty rotten when he does, though not a

bit worse than he deserves. You might perhaps throw a basin of water over him."

By a curious coincidence, Creek's first sign of returning animation synchronised with the suggestion of a cold douche to aid his recovery. He stirred faintly and opened his eyes. It would, perhaps, be more correct to say he opened his one undamaged eye, for the other was almost hidden beneath a bulging bruise. For a moment or two he gazed about him with an air of bewilderment quite consistent with newly awakened consciousness. Then, slowly and painfully, he assumed a sitting posture, and endeavoured with his pocket-handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood from his battered nose. Whereupon, Mr. Knotts turned about, coolly resumed his coat, and proceeded methodically to rearrange the furniture. His demeanour was that of a man who, having finished his job, desired to leave everything just as he found it. Creek eyed him with furtive malevolence, but maintained a sullen silence. Neither did he take any notice of John, who, with an uneasy foreboding of pending trouble, was making a show of assisting Mr. Knotts in his self-imposed task of getting the room straight again.

John was dreading every moment lest Creek, perhaps from sheer spite, should make some awkward and embarrassing reference to the Bedford crime, and it was therefore a great relief to him when Mrs. Woodford, a minute or two later, announced that she had secured a passing cab and that it was now at the door.

"Good!" said Mr. Knotts briskly. "Much

obliged to you, madam." Then, turning sharply to Creek, still seated on the floor and with a handkerchief held to his nose, he said, "Now then, you there, are you ready to clear out, or shall I *help you?*"

The ominous emphasis on the latter words, coupled with the threatening mien of the speaker, had an immediate effect on the battered blackmailer. Thoroughly cowed, as he now was, by the terrible gruelling he had received, and bruised and sore from head to foot, that hint of yet further rough handling filled him with a craven fear. Had he but dared, he would have let loose a few poisoned shafts of innuendo at the "client" who had thus entrapped him, but the merciless determination of the ex-prizefighter to fling him out, neck and crop, if need be, was so unmistakable that he had perforce to bottle up the burning fury that consumed him. He was literally too cowed to utter a word.

With an effort that caused him more pain than those who witnessed it could have even guessed, he staggered to his feet. Then, having feebly picked up his hat and gloves, he shot one vitriolic glance at John — a glance in which the fire of vengeful purpose already burned like a portent of the evil to come — and slunk in sullen silence from the room.

Mr. Knotts, a grim smile lurking about the corners of his square-set jaw, watched from the window the blackmailer's final disappearance, another chuckle escaping him as he noted the manifest difficulty he experienced in getting into the waiting cab.

For some moments after the cab had gone Mr. Knotts continued to gaze from the window, apparently lost in thought. He was wondering how this young man, his daughter's fiancé, of whom he had formed so favourable an opinion, could ever have become acquainted with such an obvious scoundrel as the maimed and battered creature whom that cab had just borne away. By nature, Mr. Knotts was slow to suspect where once he had formed a good opinion, and being, moreover, essentially a man of the world, he was more disposed to regard the compromising situation in which he had discovered young Rutland that morning as the outcome of some youthful escapade of which the blackmailer had taken advantage, rather than as evidence of any serious wrongdoing. Had he arrived on the scene in time to overhear John's offer of ten pounds he would probably have regarded the matter in a different light, but he had missed that by a few seconds, and the first words he had heard had been John's indignant outburst—"You liar!" followed by his threat to throw Creek out of the room. Then had come the insolent demand for twenty-five pounds—a demand which had quite obviously been already—made accompanied by precisely that kind of intimidation which a blackmailer might be expected to employ when he realised that his efforts to extort money by other means had failed. Probably enough, Mr. Knotts reflected, young Rutland's life had not been altogether blameless during that pleasure-seeking period which had followed the attainment of his majority, when he had found himself possessed of an independent income; but—



well, young men would be young men, and Mr. Knotts remembered that he had been one himself once. A sense — a perhaps unsuspected sense — of delicacy deterred him from seeking to probe needlessly into that past. He was satisfied in his own mind that there was nothing inherently bad about John Rutland; indeed, he found it impossible to feel otherwise towards one with so honest and open a face, and with such a straightforward, manly bearing. None the less, as the father of the girl to whom this young man was engaged, he wanted to be quite certain that his own intuitive interpretation of the affair was correct. And his method of satisfying himself on this point was characteristic of the man.

Wheeling abruptly round, he strode up to John and stood squarely before him. Though there was nothing hostile or threatening in his attitude, it was yet the attitude of a man with whom it would be dangerous either to hedge or prevaricate.

"Mr. Rutland, you are engaged to my daughter," he said, speaking slowly and looking very straight at John. "Now, in view of what has just happened, I am going to put you a plain question. And I want you to give me a plain answer. . . . *Have you done anything to make you afraid of that — that blackguard?*"

John met the big man's steadfast gaze with a fearlessness that was secretly gratifying to the latter.

"No! Never in the remotest degree," he said with an emphasis and candour that could scarcely have been more convincing.

"Good! I believe you."

The words were spoken with an air of broad-minded dismissal of the matter that came as a great relief to John, to whom it suddenly occurred that he had not formed a high enough opinion of Mr. Knotts.

The latter was now lighting a cigar with as much unconcern as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Lummy!" he grunted abruptly, with one of his short, grim chuckles, "I'm uncommonly glad I had occasion to come over here this morning. It was as good as a tonic to me to have the chance of setting about a scoundrel like that. And I don't think, my lad, he's likely to trouble you again in a hurry, eh?"

"No, indeed," said John readily enough, though he had his secret misgivings on this score. "And I'm very much indebted to you," he added, "for giving the fellow such a hiding."

"Not at all. I relished the job," declared the ex-prizefighter.

"But now I must tell you," he went on, seating himself comfortably in the easy-chair which John had pushed towards him, "I must tell you what has brought me over here in this unexpected fashion. The fact is, my wife heard this morning that a very old friend of hers who lives on the other side of London is ill, and she and my daughter have gone across to see her, and can't very well get back until late to-night. Of course, as you know, they were expecting you over this afternoon, and my daughter seemed upset at the idea of your having

a lost journey. She wouldn't hear of your being put off by a mere wire, as she expressed it, but begged me to come over and explain the matter for her. Quite unnecessary, of course, for I'm sure you would have understood, but"—here Mr. Knotts shrugged his broad shoulders good-naturedly—"girls are apt to be funny creatures in these matters, you know, and it is sometimes more conducive to a peaceful atmosphere to humour them.

"And, of course, Mr. Rutland, we shall hope to see you over to-morrow. I was to be sure to tell you that."

"Thank you very much," said John, not a little relieved that he was to be spared the ordeal of visiting his fiancée that afternoon. "I'll come over to-morrow with pleasure."

His little commission having been duly carried out, the ex-prizefighter drifted into a reminiscent mood, recounting for John's benefit, yet with no trace of brag, some of the battles he had won by means of a knock-out similar to that which he had administered to the blackmailer.

"The 'Billy Knotts jaw-splitter' they used to call it," he confessed with a touch of perhaps pardonable pride.

Meanwhile, the latest victim to the telling effects of that particular punch sat huddled in a slow-moving, jolting four-wheeler, wending its way leisurely in the direction of Pimlico.

"Curse him! Curse the pair of them!" he muttered, clasping his aching head. His whole attitude was that of one writhing not only from physi-

cal pain but from an all-consuming, overwhelming lust for revenge.

*"Engaged to his daughter, eh?"*

And the flicker of a ghastly leer distorted the cruel lips, that looked infinitely more cruel with the vivid stains of blood about them. "I'll be even with them yet — *and at one stroke!*"

## CHAPTER X

### JOHN MAKES A SLIP

GLADYS WOODFORD was laying breakfast in John Rutland's sitting-room one morning shortly after the incident described in the preceding chapter. Her face wore an expression of unusual perplexity as she quietly set about her task.

"I can't make it out at all," she said to herself thoughtfully. "It does seem so strange. He doesn't seem the same fellow. I notice it in so many little ways. And what is stranger still, he doesn't *look* the same fellow, though I can't quite say in what way."

Her thoughts had reference to the young man in the room overhead, and who at this moment was leisurely engaged in the operation of shaving himself.

"Another thing," Gladys went on to herself — and here a faint blush tinged her rounded cheeks, "the very morning that I was first struck by the difference, or whatever it is, he seemed to take sudden notice of *me*. He looked at me almost as though he had never seen me before, and even seemed quite embarrassed for a moment. I remember it was the morning following that night when he came home late, after we had all gone to bed, and brought some friend in with him. Be-

cause I know I was afraid it might disturb Mother, though I must say they were very quiet.

"And how anxious and worried he has looked lately! Especially after that awful set-to in his room the other morning. What a dreadful sight that fellow was who was taken away in the cab! I shall never forget the look on his face as he limped down stairs. I wonder what it was all about?"

Gladys Woodford's reflections were interrupted at this juncture by the sharp rat-tat of the postman, followed by the measured tread of her mother going to the door.

"Ah me," exclaimed that lady sadly a few moments later as she joined her daughter in John Rutland's sittingroom. "Nothing for poor old me. Nobody ever writes to me now, though, alas! I can remember the time when I used to get letters galore. . . . It's only a post card for Mr. Rutland," she added wearily, in answer to her daughter's interrogating glance.

Mrs. Woodford was in one of her most dejected and complaining moods this morning, due possibly to a slight accentuation of her old lumbago trouble. With an air of complete resignation to a callous world she adjusted her spectacles in order that she might read the card addressed to her lodger, for the good lady was not superior to a dash of feminine inquisitiveness.

"Humph, what a dry, uninteresting card," she remarked in a tone which appeared to imply the existence of a reasonable ground for anticipating something in the nature of a refreshing diversion. "Just listen to this, Gladys,"—with a glance at

her somewhat preoccupied daughter. "If still disengaged please give us a call to-morrow afternoon about 4 o'clock. Borneholm, Barkington & Co., 29a Philpot Lane, E. C.' Upon my word," Mrs. Woodford added as she deposited the card on her lodger's breakfast-table, "it wasn't worth while putting on my spectacles to read it."

Gladys smiled at her mother's view of the matter. "I expect Mr. Rutland won't think it dry and uninteresting," she said brightly. "Don't you remember, mother, Borneholm, Barkington & Co. are the people he was with when he first came to us? I think they are solicitors, and I know Mr. Rutland told us he had been with them ever since he left school. It looks from that card as though they want to have him back again."

"Ah, yes, I remember now. And he gave them a week's notice the very day he came of age! Just because he had come into an annuity under his father's will and wanted to have a good time, as he expressed it. And I remember I made bold to tell him that it was just like the young men of the present day to think of pleasure first, and that he was sure to regret it. An idle life is no good to anyone, as I used to tell your poor dear father when he had a day off."

And Mrs. Woodford sighed reminiscently.

"Yes, mother, but didn't Mr. Rutland tell us only the other day he had made up his mind to get a situation again as he was tired of doing nothing?"

"Tired of doing nothing, indeed! I should think he ought to be by this time. Myself, I can't under-

stand a young man choosing a life of mere idleness. I know I would never have consented to marry your poor dear father if he had been that way inclined."

With which practical observation Mrs. Woodford returned her spectacles to their case with an air of quite unusual decision.

Gladys was silent for a few moments, apparently lost in thought.

"Have you noticed any — any difference in Mr. Rutland lately, mother?" she asked suddenly.

"Difference? In what way?"

"Well, I can hardly say in what way, but somehow he doesn't seem quite the same, and I've even thought sometimes that he — that he *looks* different. Perhaps it is that I have noticed something about him that I had not noticed before."

"Well, the only difference *I've* noticed," remarked Mrs. Woodford grimly, "is in his appetite. Just lately he's been eating twice as much as he used to. Whatever we put before him, it simply disappears. A good job he pays for what he has instead of my making a fixed charge for each meal, like I used to do with old Mr. Wogan, you remember. Why, sixpence for breakfast would go nowhere with Mr. Rutland, with his present appetite. . . . Still, as lodgers go nowadays, I suppose he's good enough — always pays up on the day, and keeps himself respectable. But I must say I should really have had to give him notice after that dreadful disturbance the other morning if the big gentleman hadn't behaved so handsomely about it. . . . Ah, I can see him now as he slipped that five-



pound note in my hand, with his 'humble apologies' as he put it. A real gentleman that, and no mistake. And what a man, too! Your poor dear father was a biggish man, but he would have looked small beside him. And to think that Mr. Rutland is engaged to his daughter!"

Gladys was apparently so pre-occupied in making a slight — and, it may be added, entirely superfluous — readjustment of the breakfast-table, that Mrs. Woodford, with a murmured, "Ah me, I suppose I must get on with my toil again," returned to the kitchen to supervise the preparation of a dish of eggs and bacon for her hungry lodger.

A few minutes later, that young man descended to his sittingroom, which Gladys had meanwhile quitted. He read the brief post card with considerable interest.

"Humph, this is all right," he said to himself with a chuckle of satisfaction. "No doubt this is one of the jobs my double applied for. He told me he had been answering advertisements, and I only sent in *my* first application two or three days ago. And a firm wouldn't say 'if *still* disengaged' to that. . . . No, it's a cert. that it is one of his earlier applications, and I can only trust to luck that I shall fit in tolerably with his qualifications. Anyhow, I'll have a jolly good try. Rare bit of good fortune it will be, too, if I get fixed up so soon."

And John tackled his breakfast with a healthy zest, elated in no small measure at the prospect of finding early employment. His naturally buoyant spirits had recovered in some degree since his

last encounter with Creek. Indeed, the more he had thought of that startling episode the more he had been convinced that, whatever bare modicum of truth there might be at the back of Creek's insinuations, his imputation of murder was an abominable lie. It was hopeless to attempt to fathom precisely what his double's connection with Creek had been, or to conjecture what might have been the bedrock of actual facts that had enabled the latter to go the length of imputing murder. John had little doubt now that Mr. Knotts' blunt estimate of Creek's character was pretty near the mark; indeed, he even wondered that he had not himself suspected this before, and he could only suppose that the scoundrel had taken advantage of the original John Rutland's ignorance of some vital fact to extort money from him by means of veiled threats of exposure, an exposure which, but for that ignorance, he would have had no occasion to fear.

And, in any case, having a perfectly clear conscience himself concerning what might, or might not, have happened at Bedford, John was becoming increasingly disposed to allow matters to take their own course and to await developments. He did not believe in anticipating trouble. Moreover, in spite of all Creek's alarming hints, nothing whatever had occurred up to the present to arouse his suspicions that his movements were in any way being observed.

Having presently finished his last round of toast and marmalade, John lit up his favourite calabash pipe and pulled at it with that sense of luxurious

contentment which, by reason of his former life of hardship and want, still came to him in moments of agreeable repletion.

"Yes," he said to himself musingly as he eyed the brief post card again, "this is jolly good. I'll certainly make a point of interviewing Messrs. Borneholm, Barkington & Co. Philpot Lane, eh? I must find out where that is. And I mustn't forget to turn up that chap's testimonial from the firm he used to be with, and take it with me. I only glanced through it very hurriedly the day after I stepped into his shoes, but I know it was a very good one. I must take careful note of its contents and commit the name and address of the firm to memory before I interview these people. I know I'm apt sometimes to overlook little details, and it would be mighty awkward if I chanced to come a cropper on such a point as that."

And John smiled to himself rather grimly at the bare idea.

A light knock at the door interrupted his reflections, and Gladys entered to enquire if she might clear away the breakfast things.

"Yes, certainly, Miss Woodford."

John had risen now and was standing on the hearth-rug, apparently immersed in the morning paper. He invariably assumed that attitude on these occasions — not by any means with the object of treating his landlady's pretty daughter with studied coolness, but rather because, for reasons which he could perhaps have scarcely defined, he somehow feared to engage in anything in the nature of a tête-à-tête with her, much as he would have

liked to do so. Moreover, be it confessed, this simple stratagem on his part enabled him, unobserved, to take occasional furtive peeps at the young lady from behind his paper and to note her graceful movements and the winsome expression of her features.

And it struck him this morning, as he took one of these furtive peeps, that he had never seen Miss Woodford look so charming before. It was really very tantalising to get only these fleeting, stealthy glimpses of her. Why not, for once, he asked himself, break down this self-imposed barrier of reserve and engage the young lady in a little conversation, of however matter-of-fact a nature.

Strangely enough, he was conscious now of a curious embarrassment in knowing how to begin, but, as it happened, Gladys herself supplied, all unwittingly, the needful inspiration. She had cleared away the breakfast things by this time and was about to fold up the tablecloth, on which still lay the post card from Borneholm, Barkington & Co. This she now picked up, and, with only a slight turn towards John, whom she apparently supposed to be still deep in his paper, said in a perfectly natural way, "I'm putting your post card on this chair, Mr. Rutland."

A simple action and simple enough words, yet they were fraught with fateful consequences for John.

"Oh, thank you, Miss Woodford," he said, with a welcome feeling that the ice had been broken for him. "Yes, I mustn't overlook that card," he went on with a frank smile, quick to take his cue from

this chance circumstance for a little conversation. "I'm going to interview Messrs.— er — Messrs. Borneholm, Barkington & Co. this afternoon about a job, and I only hope I get it. I'm tired of my long holiday."

They were facing each other now, with no prosaic newspaper obtruding itself between them, and for a moment their eyes met in a steady gaze.

What was it in those clear blue eyes, with their depths of hidden mystery, that set John's pulses throbbing so strangely? What was it in that one brief, steadfast gaze that thrilled him as nothing yet had ever done? What a travesty of all the emotions he now felt were his feelings towards the girl in relation to whom he had accepted the rôle of affianced lover!

Then Gladys' eyes dropped, and John noted an expression of embarrassment and perplexity on her features. For an instant he feared lest, with feminine intuition, she had detected his imposture, but her words quickly reassured him.

"I'm sure I wish you success, Mr. Rutland," she said simply. "I have sometimes wondered how you could endure having nothing to do for so long."

"Yes, it is a wonder," said John with conviction. "I wonder myself, as I look back, how I can have tolerated it all these months." He was quite at his ease again now, and felt emboldened to carry the conversation, so happily begun, a little further, if only that he might have the subtle joy of gazing into the mysterious depths of those beautiful eyes. "By the way, Miss Woodford," he went on in

quietly matter-of-fact tones, "I suppose you don't know the City very well, do you?"

John's confidence was somewhat shaken by the young lady's reply.

"Not know the City?" she repeated in smiling astonishment. "Well, I think I ought to know it pretty well, Mr. Rutland. Wasn't I with the Metropolitan Typewriter Company in Queen Victoria Street for three years? In fact, I was still with them, you know, when you first came here."

"Oh, to be sure. I had forgotten that for the moment," said John hurriedly, with a feeling that he had asked a question which must have suggested a lamentable lapse of memory on his part. "Yes, yes, of course you know the City quite well," he went on, anxious to cover up what he regarded as an awkward slip. "No doubt you can tell me where Philpot Lane is? I've seen it somewhere, but I can't recall exactly where. That's where this firm —"

The words died away on John's lips, for over Gladys Woodford's face had come an expression of such unbounded bewilderment that for the life of him he could not proceed. More plainly than words could tell, he knew that his thoughtless, yet simple, question had betrayed a fatal ignorance of his supposed past, and he would have given anything to recall it. But it was too late now to undo the mischief, and the guilty confusion that suddenly swept over him made him feel like a criminal unmasked.

"*Philpot Lane!*" repeated Gladys, almost like one in a dream.

Her eyes were now riveted on John with a look of eager and intense enquiry.

"*Who — who are you?*" she gasped in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper.

## CHAPTER XI

### GLADYS LEARNS THE TRUTH

FOR an instant, the bogus John Rutland felt an impulse to rush out of the house and away from everything connected with his imposture. His secret had been discovered — discovered, too, with a suddenness, an unexpectedness, that almost overwhelmed him. Doubtless, it was this circumstance that so intensified his sense of guilty embarrassment as to cause him to feel like a self-proclaimed criminal. Moreover, there was something peculiarly humiliating to John in the fact that it should have fallen to this simple, yet charming, maiden, above all others, to challenge his identity.

But a certain inherent honesty of purpose in John's nature stood him in good stead in his present dilemma, and effectually prevented him from resorting to the more than dubious expedient of endeavouring to convince his questioner — as some men in his place might have done — that he was no other than the person whom he was supposed to be. Instead, with a grim feeling upon him that the game was up, he simply blurted out the truth.

“I'm Fred Stormont.”

The words came bluntly, unhesitatingly, and in spite of his momentary confusion John returned without flinching the gaze of the girl who had thus challenged him.



"Fred Stormont," repeated Gladys, still in bewilderment. "Then — what has become — what has become of Mr. Rutland?"

"I don't know, Miss Woodford. Probably he is on his way to Canada."

Now that the truth was out, John's confusion had left him. He felt that, after all, he had nothing to be ashamed of, and that it only remained for him to make a clear statement of the extraordinary circumstances which had placed him in his present position, and then return to his old life.

"If you will allow me, Miss Woodford," he said quietly, "I will tell you exactly how it was I became 'John Rutland.'"

And this John did, with a plainness and simplicity that carried conviction, whilst Gladys listened with breathless interest and astonishment.

"It is most extraordinary," she exclaimed when at length John had finished. "I should never have dreamt such a thing could happen in real life. But tell me," she added suddenly, "are you sure that you're not related in some way to Mr. Rutland? That might account for the remarkable resemblance."

"No, we are not related in the least, so far as I know. But, as a matter of fact, I never knew much about my relations. And I have always understood that both my parents died when I was an infant."

For a few moments there was silence, during which Gladys was lost in inward speculation. She had just been told about the original John Rutland's romantic engagement to Miss Knotts and of his subsequent bitter disillusionment, but the

speaker had vouchsafed not a word concerning his own impression of the young lady in question when in due course he had entered upon the rôle of lover. And she could not help wondering if he, too, had been disappointed when he had come face to face with the girl whose photographic profile had proved so deceptive to the young man into whose shoes he had stepped.

"Well, Miss Woodford," John went on, "I hope you won't think any the worse of me for what I have done. . . . Before I go I should like just to show you this letter which Mr. Rutland gave me when we effected the exchange in case my secret should ever be discovered. I think it will satisfy you as to my *bona fides*, and that the suggestion that I should take his place came from him, and not from me." And John produced the letter in question from his pocket and held it out to Gladys.

"There is no need to show it to me," said the latter quietly. "I can believe you without that, Mr. — *Mr. Rutland*," — with a sudden smile. "You see, I still call you by your assumed name. . . . But why do you talk about going?"

John looked surprised. "It's obvious I can't do otherwise than go," he said almost bluntly.

Gladys thought for a moment.

"If you leave here what will you do?" she asked.

"Go back to my old life, of course. I have always had that possibility in mind."

An expression almost of pain crossed Gladys' face.

"Go back to your old life?" she repeated. "Back to all your old hardships? . . . Mr. Rutland," she went on earnestly, with a quiet persistence in the name that was not his by right, "why should you do anything of the kind? You have undertaken to play a certain part. Continue to play that part. You can trust me to keep your secret."

The girl's obvious sincerity touched John. He had always viewed the possible discovery of his secret as something that must involve his immediate return to that nightmare of an existence which he had exchanged for his present comfortable environment. Yet here was one who, knowing of his imposture, counselled him, with manifest sincerity, to remain where he was, a course which was assuredly more attractive, in spite of possible pitfalls, than the alternative of reverting to his old life. Moreover, it occurred to him with some assurance that the very fact of the girl's knowledge of his secret might at times minimise the difficulties of his position.

"Miss Woodford, you're a brick," he exclaimed with almost boyish impulsiveness, "and I'm very grateful to you for your promise of secrecy. . . . Yes, I'll continue to play the part of John Rutland, and I only hope," he added with a wry smile, "I shan't make such a mess of it again."

"It *was* rather an awkward slip, wasn't it?" said Gladys laughingly. "But I have no doubt it will make you more careful in the future. Of course, you won't think of interviewing Messrs. Borneholm, Barkington & Co. now? Because, you know, *that*

is the firm you are supposed to have been with for several years."

"Rather not!"

Gladys glanced at the time, and thought of her neglected duties. "It's just as well Mother is out doing the shopping this morning," she observed as she gathered up the tray with sudden briskness, "or she would have been wondering what had detained me all this time." And with a pleasant smile she withdrew.

For some time after Gladys had gone John was lost in thought on the strange chance that had brought about the discovery of his secret. Far from feeling concerned that his imposture should thus have become known to at least one person, he was conscious of a curious sense of elation at the bond of understanding which he felt had thereby been established between himself and this comely, blue-eyed maiden. Then he remembered Miss Knotts, and his brow became puckered in a manner that suggested anything but that degree of ecstasy usually associated with a young man's thoughts of his betrothed.

"I wish to heaven I could see a decent way out of it," he said to himself. "After all, I'm only a sort of proxy in the matter. And yet, of course, if I plead that as an excuse for getting out of it, I give the whole game away. I should proclaim myself as a mere interloper—an out-and-out impostor. Whew! I can just imagine how 'Billy Knotts' would set about me. It would be another case of being sent home in a cab." And he smiled to himself grimly.

Somehow, his engagement had never seemed so irksome, so distasteful, to him as it did now, and for some time he paced up and down the room in a state of mental perturbation quite unusual in him.

Presently there was a knock at the front door, and John heard Dick Dashmead's familiar voice enquiring for him. A moment later and he was coming upstairs, but with such an unwonted deliberation as to cause John to doubt if it could indeed be he.

"Hullo, what's the matter?" he exclaimed as Dick entered the room, limping rather than walking, and his good-humoured face bearing evident traces of a recent fistic encounter.

"I'm awfully sorry for you, old man," observed Dick cryptically, as he sank into an easy-chair. "I really am. I'm afraid you'll have to go through with this business. Nothing else for it."

"Whatever do you mean?" enquired John in astonishment. "Go through with what business? And what on earth have you been up to, to get yourself into that state?"

"Can't you guess, you stupid donkey?" was Dick's uncomplimentary response. "Why, I've been making love to your fiancée, and your precious father-in-law-that-is-to-be caught me on the job. Crikey! *What* a punch he's got. I'm sore all over, to say nothing of what was once my face. Make no mistake about it, you poor, miserable wretch, you've jolly well got to carry that romantic, hastily-conceived engagement of yours to its logical conclusion."

The broad, good-natured grin that broke out on

Dick's temporarily damaged countenance gave it a highly comical appearance, and John could not resist a smile in spite of himself.

"I'm sorry you got let in for such a basting," he said. "Tell me all about it."

Dick proceeded leisurely to light a cigarette.

"I had quite expected you would hear all about it last night at Ilford," he said. "Weren't you over there?"

"No. I had excused myself for last night as it happened. To tell you the truth, I felt that a suggestion of cooling off on my part might pave the way a bit for you."

"Not a ha'porth of good, old chap," was Dick's discouraging reply. "But I can tell you this much," he went on in a tone that seemed to imply some little satisfaction from the reflection, "I really think I was beginning to make an impression. I don't wish to brag, but there is no doubt I was getting along fine when — well, when I had the abominable ill-luck to be spotted by the dear girl's pugnacious pater."

"I had contrived very neatly to meet her on two occasions — accidentally, of course — in that park opposite where they live. Well, yesterday we drifted together right across to the further end of the park, where it was as quiet as you could wish, and it occurred to me that I had better make the most of the opportunity. Perhaps it was somewhat precipitate on my part, and of course I was running a risk, but when a chap's in love with a girl he doesn't think about that."

And for a moment Dick looked quite dejected.

"Are you really gone on her?" queried John bluntly.

"I am. And I think you're a duffer to be so infernally exacting about the girl's looks. I think she's ripping."

"Jolly hard lines, old man, that you were not able to carry the matter through," said John feelingly. "I suppose you were making love full-speed-ahead when Mr. Knotts appeared on the scene?"

"Exactly," Dick acquiesced ruefully. "Most abominable slice of ill-luck, wasn't it? My word, didn't he go for me, too! Never stopped to ask any questions, but simply said he was going to give me a hiding. . . . And he did, too!"

"And yet, mind you," went on Dick with a sudden manly candour, "he was a proper sportsman all the time. He gave me a fair chance to defend myself, and I had a feeling all the while that he was really letting me off lightly compared with what he might have done. But, bless you, you should see him when he is once on the job! As you know, I'm pretty handy with the gloves myself, and I turn the scales at fourteen stone, but I simply hadn't the ghost of a chance with him. Not the ghost! He stretched me out properly inside of two minutes.

"And when I came to," Dick continued with a comical chuckle, "the old sport—for I can't help calling him that—was calmly squaring a park-keeper who had made an inopportune appearance on the scene."

"And how did Miss Knotts take it all?" en-

quired John, who was as much chagrined at the turn of events as Dick himself.

"Oh, she was genuinely distressed. I'm sure of that. In fact, my only grain of comfort is in the recollection of the sympathetic glance she threw me as her father marched her off."

And for a few moments Dick lapsed into a dejected silence.

"Never mind, old man, you may win her yet," said John with a display of optimism that he was far from feeling. "You mustn't despair."

But Dick only shook his head mournfully. "Let's change the subject," he said abruptly. "It's a painful one for me — in more senses than one. . . . What's this card about?"

And with the freedom of an old friend, he picked up the post card from Borneholm, Barkington & Co. and read it. "Hullo! So the old firm want you back again, do they?" he exclaimed. "What a slice of luck, eh?"

"Not a bit of good to me," said John with an air of quiet decision. "I have no wish to return to the law." And he pulled complacently at his pipe with a feeling that he had made a very neat excuse.

But it was obvious that Dick was considerably astonished. "Well, you really *are* the most erratic, changeable beggar I ever came across," he declared with characteristic force. "Upon my word, you're just like a blooming weather-cock! Why, I'll swear it's only two or three weeks since you were saying how glad you would be to get back into the old show again but that you hadn't the face to write and ask them to take you. Now, here is the



very chance you wanted, and you calmly say it's no good to you! Hanged if I believe you want a job at all!"

John laughed good-naturedly as the easiest way of concealing his secret discomfiture.

"Oh, yes, of course I want a job," he said in a tone of mild remonstrance. "But as to going back to Borneholm, Barkington & Co.'s, I feel — er — on more mature reflection, that it would be a mistake. Better strike out in a new direction altogether while I'm about it."

"Fiddlesticks! The next thing will be, in about a week's time, after a little more of your mature reflection, you'll be wishing to goodness you had jumped at the chance."

"I don't think that is very likely," said John with a greater feeling of decision on the point than he cared to evince. "As I was telling you just now, I don't want to go back into the law. It's as dry as dust."

Considering that John had never held a position in a legal office and had had about as much experience of the law as a schoolboy, he spoke with commendable conviction.

After a little further desultory conversation, Dick, who was obviously not in his usual good spirits, took his departure. "You must let me know how you get on out at Ilford this evening," he said as he left. "They are sure to say something about my little affair."

But, somewhat to John's surprise, they did not. He had quite expected that Mr. Knotts would make some reference to it, and John appreciated the un-

looked-for delicacy of feeling which he rightly guessed lay at the back of the ex-prizefighter's silence. Neither was there the slightest hint in the latter's manner that anything untoward had happened.

But John fancied he could detect a certain something in the attitude of Miss Knotts towards him — an indefinable something — that seemed rather to lend colour to Dick's confident assertion of the impression he had produced in that quarter, a circumstance which caused John to regret, as bitterly as the discomfited Dick himself, the ill-fate that had nipped his friend's enterprise in the bud.

## CHAPTER XII

THE REV. TOBIAS KIDD

"THE Rev. Tobias Kidd to see you, Mr. Rutland."

It was Gladys Woodford who, with the suspicion of a smile lurking in the depths of her blue eyes, made the foregoing announcement, and as she did so she handed John a neat, unostentatious visiting-card which bore, in severely plain print, the name of the visitor in question, whilst in the corner of the card appeared the words, "British Central Africa Evangelical Mission."

An uneventful period of a week or so had passed since Gladys' discovery of John's secret, and at the moment that young man was busily engaged in writing a letter of application for a position advertised in the morning paper.

John's face was a study in bewilderment as he glanced at the card.

"The Rev. Tobias Kidd," he repeated, half to himself. Then he smiled meaningly at Gladys. "You don't happen to know, Miss Woodford," he queried in an undertone, "if I am supposed to be on terms of intimacy with this good man? I don't need to tell you that I haven't the remotest idea who he is."

"Well, he hasn't called here before," said Gladys dubiously. "On the other hand, his tone and manner seemed to be quite that of an old friend, and he

looked awfully pleased when I told him you were in. He is a very old man, and so bent. Perhaps I had better ask him up?"

"Thank you, Miss Woodford. Yes, it may look funny if I don't see him."

"Confound it all," muttered John to himself when Gladys had disappeared. "I wonder if this chap is merely touting for subscriptions, or whether I'm letting myself in for a bad half-hour with somebody who knows a jolly sight more about me than I do myself. Speaks quite like an old friend, does he? I don't like that a bit. He may have christened me, for all I know. What a nuisance that my double didn't coach me a bit better concerning my —"

His reflections were interrupted by a slow, shuffling tread on the stairs, and through the half-open door he heard the laboured breathing of one who evidently found the ascent none too easy. He rose to greet his visitor, his secret vexation concealed beneath a pleasant, non-committal smile, and all his senses alert to the peculiar uncertainty of his position in relation to the stranger.

"Ah, my dear John, my dear young friend," exclaimed the Rev. Tobias Kidd as he entered the room and carefully closed the door behind him, "how pleased — how more than pleased I am to see you once again — after all these years!" He clasped John's hand with fervour, and his voice, muffled and subdued with age, quavered in a manner that suggested considerable emotion.

As Gladys had said, he was a bent, old man, and his curious, semi-clerical garb served only to accen-

tuate the lean proportions of an uncommonly lanky figure. He had a wonderful crop of snowy-white hair, rendered the more striking by contrast with a complexion the deep hue of which might well have been attributable to long and zealous service in the cause of the British Central Africa Evangelical Mission; whilst a heavy, drooping, white moustache, concealed rather than adorned his mouth. A pair of close-fitting tinted glasses gave an impression of weak eyes, but the large, well-worn bible which the reverend gentleman carried beneath his arm contradicted any suggestion that the afore-said weak eyes were entirely past useful service.

Though John was by no means drawn towards his patriarchal and somewhat sanctimonious-looking visitor, he was quick to realise from the latter's greeting that it was incumbent upon him to make some show of pleasure at this unexpected encounter.

"Well, this is indeed a pleasant surprise, Mr. Kidd," he exclaimed with an admirable semblance of cordiality, his hand still clasped in the stranger's somewhat clammy palm. "Fancy seeing you again — after all these years, too! How are you, my friend?"

For an instant, something like the suspicion — the faintest suspicion — of a smile that was not intended passed over Mr. Kidd's features, but it was so elusive, so transient, and harmonised so little with his next words, that John could only suppose that the passing flicker must have expressed some other feeling than anything in the nature of mere amusement.

"By the grace of Heaven," said Mr. Kidd solemnly, "I have much for which to be thankful on the score of my health. But, as you see, my dear young friend, I am sore stricken in years, and am but waiting — humbly — prayerfully — for the last call. And, John, I am ready — aye, willing — for that last call, whenever it may come. . . . Ah, thank you, thank you," as John drew up an easy-chair and begged his aged visitor to be seated. "You were ever considerate of your elders, I remember, even as a little child." He placed his well-worn bible on the table by his side, and, leaning towards John, peered through his tinted glasses close into the young man's face. "Dear me! dear me!" he exclaimed, almost in awe, his tremulous voice seeming to suggest sadly reawakened memories, "unless my poor feeble eyes much deceive me, how very like you are to your dear and long-departed father. The — very — image — of him! A truly remarkable resemblance."

As John was not sure on the spur of the moment whether he was supposed to be able to remember his deceased "father" with sufficient distinctness to justify his concurrence, or otherwise, in the alleged resemblance, he merely smiled his acknowledgment and sought discreetly to steer the conversation into a safer channel.

"And how have you been getting on all this time, Mr. Kidd?" he enquired with the best show of interest he could assume, and wondering uneasily when he was last supposed to have heard anything about his unwelcome visitor.

A slightly injured expression crossed the old

man's lean features. "I notice, dear John," he said with an air of mild remonstrance, "that you address me as 'Mr. Kidd.' In the long ago it was always *Uncle Kidd*. Why not — oh, why not *Uncle Kidd* still, dear boy? Don't let the passage of long years —"

"Oh, to be sure," broke in John hurriedly, anxious to retrieve the slip. "It certainly seems more like old times for me to call you *Uncle Kidd*, doesn't it? Forgive my — er — momentary diffidence on that score. . . . Now, do tell me all about yourself — *Uncle Kidd*!"

It was John's object to let his visitor do the talking. In the presence of one who was evidently an old, and doubtless intimate, friend of the Rutland family, he was too conscious of the peril of pitfalls to care to say more himself than he was obliged to. He would have greatly preferred to cut the interview short, there and then, but he could see no way of doing this without a flagrant breach of common courtesy. He felt, indeed, that he had let himself in for precisely that bad half-hour which he had feared, and he could only hope devoutly that his lamentable ignorance of his double's family history would not betray him into some irretrievable blunder.

Fortunately, his assumption of eager interest, coupled with his expression of readiness to address his visitor in the old familiar way, appeared to have a mollifying effect upon that gentleman.

"Ah, thank you, thank you, dear John," he mumbled appreciatively. "Yes, it does indeed

bring back old times to hear you call me Uncle Kidd.

“And as to how I have been getting on all this time,” he went on after a pause, as though carefully weighing his words, “I may perhaps say, in all humility of spirit, that I have contrived, by the grace of Heaven, to carry out my purpose in life.”

Here the speaker laid a long, and curiously claw-like, hand upon the bible by his side. “Yes, in lands far distant, where the sun has shone with a fierceness that has nearly blinded me, and has scorched my skin as you see it now, I have preached the Gospel to the heathen. Year in, year out — ah, but what a labour of love it has been! . . . And, oh, the blessed joy I feel as I look back upon my long ministrations to the spiritual needs of those far-away heathens.”

And the Rev. Tobias Kidd clasped his hands together and gazed upwards through his tinted spectacles in a kind of ecstasy, whilst his lips moved as though in silent prayer.

John watched the old man with mixed feelings, and wished anew that he might bring the interview to a speedy close. He had a deference for old age, and though not perhaps of a religious temperament himself in the conventional sense, he had none the less a sincere respect for all things sacred. Yet there was something in his visitor's outburst of pious fervour that inspired him with repugnance rather than with any loftier sentiment. Somehow, it did not ring true.

“But, John, dear boy,” the old man went on



after a few moments' silence, "do tell me all about yourself. You cannot think how often I have wondered how you were getting on, and whether I should be spared to see you again some day. Heaven has mercifully granted me this privilege, and so I beg that you will unburden yourself to your dear departed father's old, old friend. I feel a deep and — may I say? — natural concern for your welfare. . . . Tell me, my lad, are you engaged to be married?"

"Oh, yes, I'm engaged right enough," said John with a smile.

"Really! Now that is most interesting. Er — I do hope and pray that the young lady of your choice is, if I may say so without wounding your susceptibilities — er — everything that can be desired?" It was quite obvious that no offence was intended by this somewhat frank enquiry.

"Oh, rather," assented John with a ready assumption of warmth.

"*I am* so pleased," the old man mumbled delightedly. "How I should like to have been able to see the young lady and to have given her my blessing. Perhaps, dear John, I may at least have the pleasure of gazing upon her photo — that is, if you have one of her by you?"

"Of, of course I have," said John smilingly. "A very beautiful photo it is too." And he produced the photograph in question and handed it to his aged visitor with some show of alacrity — even of pride.

John felt he was on safe ground here, and there was no earthly reason why he should give that gen-

tleman the least inkling of his secret disappointment over his fiancée.

There was no doubt about the interest aroused in the breast of the Rev. Tobias Kidd at the sight of this photo. Indeed, through his tinted glasses, he peered at it so long and steadfastly that John began to imagine something in the nature of criticism would be forthcoming. But in this he was mistaken.

"Very — very beautiful," the old man mumbled softly, almost to himself. Then, with a last lingering scrutiny, he handed the photo back to John.

"How I wish I could have seen the dear girl," he repeated half mournfully, "if only to give her my blessing. But, alas, I fear that is impossible, for I must soon return to the scenes of my labours in British Central Africa, for a last effort at work in the good cause. . . . Ah, but I might at least write, to convey my best wishes — and my blessing."

This apparent afterthought seemed to afford the old man some satisfaction, and he turned an interrogating glance towards John.

"Do, by all means," said the latter, secretly rather amused at the old man's insistence to bestow his blessing, and quite indifferent as to whether he wrote or not. "I will give you my fiancée's address, if you like."

"Oh, thank you, dear John, thank you so much," was the mumbled, yet eager, response.

John wrote the address on a slip of paper and handed it to his visitor, and was much relieved, after a few minutes' further conversation, to see

that that gentleman now showed signs of taking his departure. Neither was he in the least chagrined upon being told that he was not likely to see him again "on this side of Jordan," as the reverend gentleman expressed it, owing to the imminence of his departure for that distant land where he hoped, and believed, his old bones would find their last resting place.

A few minutes later and John was alone, with the aged missionary's patriarchal blessing, uttered in croaking tones, still ringing in his ears.

"Rum old stick, that," he said to himself as he lit a pipe. "I'm uncommonly glad he's gone. I was half afraid he would stop to dinner. An insufferable old prig, that's what he is. Yet evidently enough, he must have been on intimate terms with my supposed father. Upon my word, I'm beginning to think the Rutland family must have been a queer lot, judging from their choice of friends.

"Heavens, though, how he did devour that girl's photo! He really seemed tremendously impressed with it. It is an extraordinary thing how everyone is who sees it." And John smiled to himself rather grimly. "Oh, well, I got through that unexpected little interview all right, after all, and am not likely to have to face another from that quarter, it seems. That's something to be thankful for. I wonder if his beloved savages will make a meal of him as a last compliment — a sort of final act of homage? Can't say I feel much perturbed at such a prospect, anyhow. . . . Now, let's get on with this letter of application."

And John applied himself to his interrupted task, glad enough to waste no further thought on his unwelcome visitor.

Meanwhile, the old gentleman whose possible fate at the hands of hungry cannibals had been so airily dismissed by John Rutland might have been seen making his way, with slow, shuffling steps, in the direction of the High Road. His bent frame and feeble gait were in keeping with his years, but the crafty smile that now hovered about his mouth as he plodded on struck a curiously discordant note in the otherwise venerable appearance of the aged missionary.

"Good, very good, so far," he muttered softly to himself. "I've got an indelible picture in my mind's eye of that dear girl of his. Heavens, though, how my hand itched to knife him, there and then. But that would have been to make a mess of things, and I'm on a better tack than that. I'll be even with him yet, and with that cursed bruiser, too. . . . No half-measures about my revenge, not if I know it!"

For a moment, the dark purpose that was brewing in the man's mind betrayed itself in an expression of extraordinary malevolence as he shuffled on, but he quickly checked himself and remembered that he was still, outwardly, the Rev. Tobias Kidd.

"I must play my part even here," he said to himself. "One never knows who may be watching. In such a game as I'm now on one can't be too wary."

Pursuing his way with carefully masked features, he presently gained the High Road, where he

boarded a car bound for Highgate, accepting with gracious thanks and mumbled blessing the proffered assistance of a kindly-disposed conductor who took compassion on his seeming infirmity. Then he subsided into a seat, placed his bible on his knees, and, with an air of would-be benignity, gazed about him through his tinted glasses. The car was fairly full, and many curious, half-pitying glances were directed towards him, a circumstance which the Rev. Tobias Kidd regarded as a tribute to the excellence of his make-up.

Suddenly, a slight, barely perceptible start escaped him as his roving gaze alighted on a young man seated almost opposite to him. Rather showily dressed, he was an undersized, sullen-looking fellow, with the type of face more commonly encountered in the purlieus of Whitechapel.

"Isaac Cohen, or I'm a Dutchman!" muttered the Rev. Tobias Kidd to himself, bending low over his bible, which he had now abruptly opened. "What the devil is *he* doing out here? What a mercy I'm so effectively disguised. I don't want any old-time confederate butting in just now, especially one with such a grudge against me as he has. Lord, but how neatly I did him over our last deal!"

And for the rest of the journey to Highgate the Rev. Tobias Kidd appeared to be deeply engrossed in the book upon his knees.

## CHAPTER XIII

### PROFESSOR DEEPSTONE

ONE morning, shortly after the Rev. Tobias Kidd's visit to John Rutland, Miss Knotts was sitting in Valentine's Park, the pleasant park that was so conveniently adjacent to her home. Although the summer was nearly over, it was a day of blazing sunshine, and Miss Knotts selected a seat in the cool shade near the lake. While not naturally a young lady of solitary habits, she was glad on this occasion to be alone.

Truth to tell, she was in a somewhat unhappy and disturbed frame of mind. And when a maiden, in her early twenties, is thus afflicted, it is big odds that a love affair is at the bottom of her troubles. It certainly was so in this instance.

It was nothing less than a suspicion, a very disquieting suspicion, that her lover was beginning to tire of her, that caused Miss Knotts such uneasiness of mind this morning. That he might have been disappointed in her from the very outset, by reason of that extremely flattering photograph, never for a moment entered her head. The explanation of this failure of perception on her part was quite simple. Essentially vain, as she was, concerning her personal charms, the photograph in question was *not*, in Miss Knotts' opinion, flattering; it merely did her justice; if, indeed, so much

could be said for it. True, she had a slight — very slight — cast in her left eye which would not have been apparent in the photo, but such was the young lady's vanity that she was far from acknowledging this as any detriment to her appearance; on the contrary, she felt that it imparted a certain piquancy to her gaze. And there was assuredly at least one respect in which the photo did not even do her justice, to wit, the unrivalled beauty of her hair, with its delicate nut-brown tint.

Thus, had the point been raised, would Miss Knotts have brushed aside any suggestion that there might have been disappointment on her lover's part from the moment that he first set eyes on her.

But she had become conscious latterly that John's love-making was a somewhat half-hearted affair, that it seemed to be lacking in ardour and spontaneity, a discovery, by the way, which she might have made sooner had she not been so completely carried away by her own feelings of affection.

Then, too, it seemed curious that an engagement ring had not yet materialised, and that her lover had been content to defer the purchase of that customary token of betrothal on the alleged ground that he could not at the moment afford to buy a ring of sufficient beauty. That was what he had said, and of course it might be true enough, but it was significant that he had not referred to the matter since.

The inference to be drawn, Miss Knotts told herself, was that her lover's devotion must be on the

wane, an admission which, to a young lady of her temperament, was peculiarly humiliating.

And yesterday an incident had occurred, trifling in itself yet full of subtle significance, which had added fuel to the fire of her recently kindled suspicions.

Miss Knotts having expressed a not unnatural desire to see her fiancé's "diggings," John had invited her and her father and mother over to tea, and thither they had duly gone. Except for the trifling incident referred to, which had apparently escaped the notice of her parents, Miss Knotts, it may be mentioned, had enjoyed herself most thoroughly; for John, with admirable tact, had risen nobly to the occasion and proved himself a delightful host in his snug bachelor quarters.

But — there had been a glimpse of Gladys Woodford, of whose existence Miss Knotts had hitherto been quite unaware. It had indeed been only a glimpse, just when she had cleared away the tea things, but it had sufficed to enable Miss Knotts to note that she was extremely pretty. And she had caught, though for an instant only, a certain look on John's face that had set her thinking.

She remembered that look now, as she sat alone in the cool shade of Valentine's Park, and she remembered, too, a certain indefinable demureness on the part of the maiden towards whom it had been directed. Viewed thus in the steady light of recent recollection, the incident, so small perhaps in itself, opened up a field of very unpleasant speculation. Like most young women of marked personal vanity, Miss Knotts was intensely jealous.



Though her temperament lacked depth and stability, and savoured rather of passionate impulse, there could be no doubt that, for the time being at all events, she was very much in love with John Rutland. But it was love of the kind which is based upon, and owes its existence solely to, an unquestioned assumption of reciprocity, without which it quickly withers away. Yet her whole nature craved for love. And the thought that possibly her fiancé's affections might already have been transferred to the pretty daughter of his landlady stirred within her breast something of the feeling that had come to her when a certain former lover of hers had proved himself fickle and unworthy. This was no other than the unfortunate Frank Thompson, of whom, it may be recalled, Mrs. Knotts had spoken to her husband on the eventful afternoon when John Rutland's appearance had been so eagerly, not to say anxiously, awaited. Frank Thompson had regarded Miss Knotts as a highly desirable match from the monetary point of view, but had been injudicious enough to carry on a little love intrigue in another quarter that was more to his immediate liking.

Miss Knotts recalled her own fury at the discovery of young Thompson's duplicity. She had loved him with the same passionate zest as that which she now bestowed upon John, and the sudden realisation that his regard for her was purely mercenary had shattered her love at a blow. How vividly she remembered, too, the terrible thrashing her enraged father had inflicted, in her presence, upon the young man who had dared thus to trifle

with her affections, and the almost savage joy she had felt as she watched his swift reduction to a bruised mass of insensibility. For that was the nature of the prizefighter's daughter where affairs of the heart were concerned; passionate love, or bitter hatred, and the transition from the former emotional state to the latter could be as swift and sudden as a tropical storm. A great-grandmother on her mother's side had been the squaw of a Red Indian of the North-West territories, whilst on her father's side there had been generations of professional "bruisers."

But, though prone to jealousy, she was not inherently suspicious, and she was as yet far from convinced that John's love for her might not be perfectly sincere, even though it lacked the warmth and ardour of her own more demonstrative nature. She was not incapable of viewing both sides of a question, and she told herself that her lover's affection might be the more deep-seated and durable for the very defect, or seeming defect, that was the cause of her present misgivings. It was quite obvious to her that John Rutland was a very different stamp of young fellow to Frank Thompson, or, indeed, to any of the other young men of her earlier acquaintance. Yet, though he might not be fickle and superficial as they had proved to be, there was no denying that certain lack of ardour in his attitude towards her — a sort of slowing down, as it were, in his love-making, which, as she now reflected upon it, assumed perhaps an exaggerated significance. If only, she thought to herself, he had a little more of the warmth and ardour which his

amusing and by no means unattractive friend, Mr. Dashmead, had shown in his somewhat ill-chosen attempt to make love to her!

Miss Knotts could not forbear a smile as she recalled that young man's amorous overtures. They had been very sudden and unexpected, and she had somehow found it difficult either to resent them or even to treat them seriously. Perhaps their very suddenness had something to do with this. No doubt, having regard to her engagement to his friend, Mr. Dashmead had shown bad taste in attempting to make love to her, but Miss Knotts could not help wondering whether he had had any inkling himself of a growing indifference on his friend's part towards her, and whether that might possibly have been the cause of his extraordinary precipitancy. In any case, she was glad to think that her pugilistic father had—to use his own words—let him off lightly when his chance appearance on the scene had caused him to take the matter into his own hands.

In her pre-occupation, Miss Knotts had been gazing for some minutes thoughtfully into space, but she now became aware that an old, white-haired, bespectacled gentleman, who leaned heavily upon a stick, had paused opposite to where she was sitting. It may have been that the cool shade which overhung the spot attracted the passer-by, for he glanced at another seat in the near vicinity, less favoured in the matter of shade, and then moved slowly towards Miss Knotts' seat.

He was a tall, spare personage, much bent with the weight of years, and though the cut of his

clothes was old-fashioned to the point of quaintness, their obviously fine quality conveyed the impression of a man of means. Miss Knotts, however, was too pre-occupied with her own thoughts to take more than casual note of these details.

It was with a sigh of evident relief that the old gentleman sat down.

A moment later he gave a curious start.

He was gazing fixedly at Miss Knotts.

"How strange! How *very* strange!" he murmured slowly and impressively. "Dear me, it is really *most* remarkable."

Except for the direction and fixity of his gaze, it might almost have seemed as though the old gentleman were talking to himself rather than addressing the person at whom he looked so intently.

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Knotts coldly, secretly vexed at this unlooked-for obtrusion, "but were you speaking to me?"

"You must excuse my apparent rudeness, Miss," remarked the old gentleman gravely, "but a very curious thing has happened. Although I have never seen you before, it is none the less a fact that I dreamt about you last night—dreamt so vividly, indeed, that when I chanced to see your face in profile a moment ago I could not help starting at the very singular coincidence."

Miss Knotts regarded the stranger with a somewhat supercilious stare.

"You are evidently endowed with an over-active imagination, my good man," she observed icily and in a manner that clearly implied she had no desire to pursue the conversation further.

The gentleman of over-active imagination, however, was apparently not readily susceptible to a snub. Indeed, he did not appear to be conscious of any intended rebuff. Perhaps he was too deeply impressed by that "very singular coincidence," as he had termed it. He was not looking at Miss Knotts now, but was gazing straight before him in an attitude of the deepest mental abstraction, and when he spoke it was with a kind of melancholy gravity which had the effect of imparting a curious significance to his words.

"It isn't the first time I have dreamt of someone whom I have never seen before and have met just afterwards," he said. "All my life has been spent in an atmosphere of occultism, and from my early childhood I have always been intensely mediumistic. . . . Perhaps I may as well tell you — I am Professor Deepstone, the trance-medium, psychometrist and palmist. You may have heard of me?"

"I can't say that I have," replied Miss Knotts with studied indifference. Like most young ladies of ample means coupled with romantic tendencies, she had on more than one occasion "consulted" a palmist, but had so far only carried away an impression of humbug and imposture.

Professor Deepstone appeared to divine her attitude in the matter.

"I am always pleased to meet one who is sceptical of my claims," he remarked, "because it is so easy to convince them — if they care to give me the opportunity — that I am, indeed, gifted with supra-normal powers. It is nothing to boast of," he went on with a deprecating shrug of his bent

shoulders, "it is merely that I was born that way. . . . But my dream of last night! I haven't yet told you about that. It was so vivid, so real, that I cannot help feeling that it must have some special significance for you, and that our seemingly chance encounter was, after all, pre-destined."

Apparently, however, Miss Knotts did not view the matter in this light. With a slightly contemptuous toss of the head, she leisurely picked up her gloves, which had lain by her side on the seat, with the obvious intention of moving away. Had she been less pre-occupied with her own thoughts she might have been disposed, out of sheer curiosity, to listen to the strange talk of this old gentleman who styled himself Professor Deepstone, but in her present mood it aroused only a sense of impatience and she did not hesitate to show her annoyance.

It was really remarkable how impervious to rebuff the venerable professor was. Had Miss Knotts expressed an overwhelming eagerness to hear all about his dream, he could scarcely have embarked upon its recital with greater readiness. Indeed, with almost a suggestion of precipitancy and certainly with a commendable absence of preliminary — and possibly tedious — detail, he plunged, as it were, right into the heart of it. His first words were spoken with extraordinary emphasis:

*"'East Finchley! I must get to East Finchley as quickly as possible. I implore you to help me.'"* That was the strange way in which you accosted me in my dream. I seemed to be at Hyde Park Cor-

ner — just at the entrance to the Park, and there were a lot of people standing about.”

Miss Knotts had apparently changed her mind about leaving the seat. She sat very still now, and her features had become suddenly tense. She gazed straight before her and did not observe the half-furtive glance which Professor Deepstone shot at her from behind his large gold-rimmed spectacles.

After the briefest of pauses, the latter went on, speaking now in more measured tones.

“ You know what strange things we seem to do in our dreams without any consciousness of their utter incongruity at the time. Consequently, it was with no sense of surprise that I seemed to find myself, a moment later, in a taxi-cab, with you — a total stranger — by my side. We appeared to be travelling at a break-neck speed, yet you kept on calling out to the driver to go faster still. You never spoke a word to me, and the curious thing was, it never seemed to occur to me to ask any questions as to why I was being driven with you in this extraordinary fashion to East Finchley. The only thing I realised was that, for some reason entirely unknown to me, you were in a state of speechless rage. You clenched your hands and kept on muttering, ‘ Shall I be in time, shall I be in time? ’

“ At length we came to a quiet suburban road with villa residences on the right-hand side. I can see it now — as plainly as possible. You pointed to one of the houses as we drove by and said — ‘ *he* lives there! ’ ”

Professor Deepstone paused for a moment to

shoot a swift, sidelong glance at Miss Knotts' averted face. That young lady was now mechanically digging the point of her parasol into the ground, first in one place and then in another, an action which might have been intended to suggest unconcern. If this was so, it was curiously at variance with the tense expression of her features seen in profile, a fact which may have been responsible for the faint flicker of a smile which for an instant hovered about the thin lips of the professor.

When he went on again it was in a tone of suppressed excitement as though he were approaching the climax of his dream. He seemed to be living again through that strange vision of the night, and his sentences, short and incisive, had something more than a touch of the professional psychic. He spoke no longer now as of something that had already happened, but as though it were a present reality.

"We are going slower now," he said gazing fixedly before him through eyes half closed. "We stop by a narrow turning on our left, and alight. . . . It is dark. . . . We grope our way down the narrow turning. . . . We come to a field, which we cross. . . . And now a stile. We turn to the right by a thick-set hedge. . . . We walk hurriedly in silence — on and on — meeting no one. . . . It seems very lonely.

"Suddenly, you clutch my arm and point fixedly to something in the dark. . . . We stand perfectly still — and listen. . . . A young man's voice is murmuring — words of love. . . . Now it is a girl's



voice — and I catch the words — ‘Oh, John, my own dear John, *do you really love me?*’ ”

Again Professor Deepstone paused. A spasm of pain had swept across Miss Knotts’ tense features, but the man whose half-closed eyes were so fixed upon space saw it not. Indeed, over him had now come a change at once startling and significant. He seemed no longer conscious of the other occupant of the seat, whose face had suddenly been turned towards him with an eagerness that would not be denied, and her fierce, half-involuntary bidding that he should “go on with” his dream fell upon unheeding ears. Rigid and motionless as a figure carved in stone, he sat there without even the flicker of an eye-lid, whilst the intensity of his far-away gaze — as unwavering as it was uncanny — suggested vision of another world.

For a moment Miss Knotts regarded the aged professor with something approaching alarm. Then, remembering his earlier words, to which at the time she had paid so little heed, it struck her that this weird condition was doubtless the outward expression of a state of trance. All her scepticism concerning the stranger’s claims to supra-normal powers had vanished before the recital of his extraordinary dream of overnight, and the thought that instantly suggested itself to her, in her present eagerness to learn more of that which was hidden from her, was as to the possibility of further revelations whilst this state of trance continued. She had heard of such things, and had her fair share of feminine gullibility, but she was entirely at a loss as to how to proceed to obtain the desired re-

sult. With a vague idea that there should be some kind of physical contact between her and the medium, she glanced quickly around to make sure that they were unobserved. She dreaded lest the obtrusion of some chance passer-by, thinking, maybe, that the old man was ill, should break the spell. But at this hour of the day the park was quiet almost to the point of desertion, and there was no one in sight. It must be now or never, she told herself.

Swiftly, half stealthily, she glided to the old man's side, and lightly placed her hand on his.

"Tell me," she said in a voice that was burdened with emotion, "tell me — *what you can see?*"

For a brief space there was silence — a silence that, to the waiting maiden, seemed fraught with terrible possibilities. Had there been anyone to observe them they would certainly have presented a sufficiently strange picture. The motionless figure of the old man, whose half-closed eyes, gazing into space with such extraordinary fixity, seemed to be striving to pierce the veil of hidden mysteries of the world beyond; the young girl by his side leaning eagerly toward him, with her hand resting upon his, and a mute yet eloquent appeal stamped upon her face.

Then, as though speech were slowly coming to him, the old man's lips began to move, though the far-away look was still in his eyes.

"I see — I see —" he began in the halting and half muffled tones of one talking in his sleep, "I see — a young man — of medium height and build, yet well set up. . . . Light has come to me, and I see — his face."

There was another pause of leaden moments, and Miss Knotts strove in vain to restrain her impatience.

"*Describe the face,*" she said, with an emphasis that was almost fierce.

Professor Deepstone did.

In slow, dream-like tones, yet with astonishing detail and exactitude, he described the face he saw.

There was a strange, hard glitter in Miss Knotts' eyes when the professor had finished speaking, and her bosom rose and fell in a manner that suggested the surging within her of some wild tumult of emotion. It was evident, however, that she was making a supreme effort to control herself.

"Tell me," she said in a voice that was barely recognizable as her own, "can you see — the face of the *girl*. Describe *that*."

The trance-medium's response could scarcely have been better calculated to add yet further to the terrible state of Miss Knotts' feelings.

"I cannot see her face," he said slowly. "It is hidden — in the bosom of the young man. . . . But," added the old man, as though wishful even in his trance to supplement this seeming failure on his part, "I hear him — murmuring gently — that she is very, very beautiful."

The words stung Miss Knotts like a lash. Something stirred within the inmost recesses of her being, something half wild — perchance, a latent, slumbering trait, that in this cruel, tense moment was quickened into life. It brought a gleam to her eyes that would have matched the terrible stab of ferocity that had sometimes shot from the eyes

of her prizefighting father when some sorely-pressed, half-beaten adversary had sought to foul him in the ring. Well might it have startled the old man by her side had not the realms of the psychic world still wrapped him in their mysterious folds and held his vision in that strangely far-away gaze.

The silence that followed remained unbroken for some moments. Miss Knotts' eagerness had gone now, and in its place had come an unnatural calm in which lurked the first hint of a cold, set purpose. Then a sudden thought struck her and she again addressed herself to the professor, her hand still resting upon his.

"Did this — would this that you have described have happened last night?" she asked in a voice that vibrated with suppressed passion. She remembered that it was shortly before ten o'clock the previous evening when she and her parents had left East Finchley station, where John himself had seen them off.

"No. . . . No. . . . It has not happened *yet*."

Though the professor was seemingly as deep in his trance as ever, the words were spoken with a degree of clearness and emphasis that, in the circumstances, was almost uncanny. It was like a man in deepest slumber who suddenly speaks in the tones that are natural to him in his conscious state, and its effect upon the listening girl was to convey an impression of overwhelming conviction.

"When *does* it happen?" she asked with a coldness that was more terrible than any outburst could have been.

"The spirit tells me," answered the old man after a pause that seemed an eternity to Miss Knotts, "*to-night — at ten.*"

Barely had Professor Deepstone uttered the words than he began to tremble violently. Then he gave a sudden start, closed and opened his eyes, and looked about him in some bewilderment. Miss Knotts had hastily withdrawn the hand that had rested upon his, and he turned towards her.

"Oh, I remember everything now," he said with a strange smile. "I was telling you about my dream, when I suddenly went into what we term the trance state. I am sorry, because I fear it interrupted me before I had finished. Let me resume."

His voice and bearing were perfectly normal now, and he appeared to have suffered no ill-consequences from the strange condition from which he had just emerged.

"I think you *have* finished," was Miss Knotts' quiet rejoinder.

"Surely not!" said the professor in frank astonishment. "I remember quite well my last words. I was just telling you that I overheard the lovers talking, and that the girl was saying — 'Oh, John, my own dear John, do you really love me?'"

"Oh, you have made some highly interesting disclosures since then, professor!" There was something terrible in Miss Knotts' attempt at levity, and something worse in the mirthless laugh which accompanied her words.

"You don't say so! Tell me, please, exactly

what I told you in my trance state. This is a matter of professional interest to me."

Miss Knotts complied with his request with a calmness that surprised even herself. When she had finished speaking the professor remained for some moments in deep thought.

"To-night at ten," he said to himself, and echoing Miss Knotts' last words. "Very strange." Then he turned to Miss Knotts with an air of quiet decision. "Young lady," he said gravely, "in pursuit of my interest in this kind of phenomena I shall go to East Finchley to-night. I shall go there exactly as I did in my dream — by taxi-cab, which I shall hire at Hyde Park Corner. I shall alight at the narrow turning — which I know I shall instantly recognise although I have never been to East Finchley in my life — and I shall make my way to the spot of my dream, at 10 o'clock precisely.

"Yes," he went on calmly, after a moment's pause, "I must see this thing through for the purpose of scientific record. I regard it as an extremely interesting phase of dream psychology. And, although I have not the remotest doubt that it will prove strictly prophetic, I must see with my own eyes, and hear with my own ears, in order that I may be able to give first-hand evidence to the Society for Psychical Research, of which I am proud to say I am one of the oldest members. . . . By the way, young lady," he went on in a somewhat altered tone, "may I enquire if the young man whom I saw in my dream and whom I appear to

have described in my trance is, in fact, known to you?"

"The young man in question, Professor Deepstone, happens to be my *fiancé*, so I think I may claim to know him fairly well." And again Miss Knotts gave a mirthless laugh, the hollow ring of which struck a curiously discordant note.

"Oh dear, oh dear," said the old man, apparently quite upset. "I am very sorry to hear that. And yet I feared as much from the first. It seemed to me that the hand of Fate *must* be in our strange meeting. Ah well, the ways of the psychic world are indeed inscrutable and amazing."

But Miss Knotts was paying scant attention to the professor's remarks. She was turning over in her mind an idea that had just occurred to her. Like the professor, she must see with her own eyes, and hear with her own ears, so that she might know beyond all question that the lover, concerning whose sincerity and affection she had had her recent misgivings, was indeed as despicably false as the extraordinary circumstances of the last few minutes had led her to believe. Miss Knotts' impulsive nature lent itself to quick decisions, and she made up her mind very speedily on this occasion.

"Professor Deepstone," she said abruptly, "I scarcely need to tell you that this is a vital matter to me. If your dream does come true, it is imperative that I should see it for myself. I take it that you will have no objection to my accompanying you to East Finchley to-night?" There was inflexible purpose in every line of her face as she spoke.

But the professor appeared to regard this sug-

gestion with considerable astonishment, not to say alarm.

"My dear young lady," he began, looking round on her with an air of fatherly solicitude, "I am sure you had very much better remain quietly at home. Just imagine, now, what your parents would think at the bare idea of your going off on such a mission! Why —"

"They will know nothing about it," broke in Miss Knotts decisively and in a manner that clearly showed her ability to form her plans quickly. "I have a relative — an aunt — living at South Kensington, to whom, as it happens, I owe a visit. I shall give out that I am going to see her and that I shall be back in time for dinner at 6:30. We are expecting my fiancé to dinner — at least, my parents are; I need scarcely say that I am not expecting him after your very extraordinary dream. He simply won't turn up — and I may tell you it will not be the first time he has disappointed me. . . . Well, I shall not actually go to my aunt's, but I shall send a wire from the post office in her immediate neighbourhood, later in the afternoon, stating that I am stopping with her for the night. In the evening I shall go to Hyde Park Corner and meet you, and we can drive together to East Finchley. And after I have seen for myself — whatever is to be seen, I shall make the best arrangements I can for securing a night's accommodation. I know an hotel in Bloomsbury at which I have frequently stopped with my parents when we have been to a theatre."

There was a very practical, self-reliant side to



Miss Knotts' nature which could show itself on occasion, and it was uppermost now.

The professor had listened attentively to everything she said, but he still seemed to view the project with some disapproval.

"Of course, young lady," he said gravely, "you naturally do not understand these matters as I do after a life-long study of them. To you, the subject of *rapport* and all that it embraces in the realms of spiritualism is as a sealed book. Now, if you were to accompany me on this — er — mission, you would very probably mention the fact to some friend or acquaintance, even though you did not disclose it to your parents. And that simple, and not unnatural, act on your part, my dear young lady, would destroy the *rapport*; it would *break the spell*, and we should have our journey to-night for nothing. This may sound incomprehensible to you, but it is only one of the inscrutable laws that abound in psychic spheres for the confusion of those who rashly reveal their intentions to some disinterested party and thereby set in motion antagonistic influences through the medium of thought transference." And the professor concluded his jargon with a portentous shake of the head.

Probably at any other time the foregoing would have struck Miss Knotts as so much solemn humbug, but the circumstances which had led up to it had induced a degree of gullibility that rendered her ready to accept as true and feasible anything which she could not understand. None the less, she asked a very pertinent question.

"What about yourself, professor?" she asked. "You have revealed *your* intentions — to me."

"You forget," was the quick rejoinder. '*I am a born psychic*, which makes all the difference. Further," added the professor, as though by an afterthought, "I am not making the disclosure to a *disinterested* party, but to one who is vitally concerned. . . . On the other hand, any disclosure by *you* would inevitably destroy the current of influences — I use the word in its spiritualistic sense — now at work, and that which should have happened would simply fail to materialise." And the old man shot an interrogating glance at his companion to see if she followed his argument.

"You need have no fear of any disclosure from me," said Miss Knotts with convincing emphasis. "No one but yourself will know anything of my intention."

The professor thought for a few moments.

"Very well, young lady," he said resignedly, "I suppose I must fall in with your wishes. Indeed, I confess I have not the heart to deny you your very natural desire to accompany me. We had better meet — just as we did in my dream — at Hyde Park Corner. I will be there at half-past nine this evening, and will have a taxi-cab in readiness to convey us to East Finchley. If the driving at all resembles that of my dream we shall reach our destination with several minutes to spare."

Miss Knotts rose abruptly from the seat.

"I shall be there, Professor Deepstone," she said with a look of settled determination, "at half-past nine. Good morning."

And, with barely a glance at the quaintly-garbed old gentleman who had so effectually convinced her of his claims to supra-normal powers, she moved away.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CREEK'S TWO-FOLD CRIME

For some minutes after Miss Knotts had taken her departure, the old gentleman who had so recently emerged from a state of trance sat very still and quiet. Possibly he felt the need of a little rest and recuperation after his strange experience, or he may have been merely cogitating on some of the unfathomable problems that beset this mortal life. In any case, he appeared to be in no danger of lapsing into another trance.

Presently, he glanced somewhat furtively about him, to left and right, and even behind him, but there was no one in sight. Whereupon the old gentleman's hitherto staid demeanour underwent a very curious change. A leer — it could not by any stretch of the imagination be called a smile — suddenly distorted his features, and he appeared to be hugging himself with an excess of secret satisfaction.

"Ben, my boy," he muttered to himself, "you're a *genius*! You've positively eclipsed yourself, that's what you've done." And the process of self-hugging was indulged in with even greater ecstasy.

"Upon my word," he went on, "I had scarcely dared to hope my ruse would be so completely successful, or that I should have accomplished my purpose so easily. I had expected the need of giving a little demonstration with the crystal and telling her a few things concerning the romantic nature

of her attachment and engagement, etc., but there was no occasion for that. She was just about *mad* with jealousy by the time I had finished my trance. And she was so infernally cold and snotty to start with! Why, she would have walked clean away before I could have done a thing if I hadn't been slick. But I could see that I had got her fixed directly I said the words '*East Finchley*.' She didn't want to move away then. Oh dear, no. She wanted to hear the rest. . . . Yes, *I've got her — I've got her*. And to-night — to-night I'm going to get even with that two-faced puppy, John Rutland as he calls himself, and that cursed bruiser, old Billy Knotts.

"There's not the shadow of a doubt she'll turn up right enough at Hyde Park Corner. She must think it an extraordinary coincidence that the dream should have started *there* of all places — the very spot where she was first to have met her fiancé. *That* was a clever stroke. And as for that trance, well I never did a better bit of acting in my life. . . . Oh, Ben, Ben, you *are* a masterpiece!"

The aforesaid Ben — whose surname, it is perhaps superfluous to add, was Creek — was proceeding to hug himself again with renewed ecstasy, when the sound of an approaching footstep caused him to desist and to resume his former staid appearance. Glancing in the direction from whence the sound came, he saw a tall, big-chested, burly figure swinging round a bend in the path, and striding rapidly towards him.

It was "old Billy Knotts," the ex-champion

heavy-weight pugilist, taking his morning constitutional.

Creek, long-trained in the art of self-mastery, and confident in his disguise, betrayed no sign of the momentary alarm which this sudden apparition caused him. Seemingly, there was nothing more than mere idle curiosity in his gaze as he watched the heavy, massive figure that yet walked with such easy swinging strides, and with the well-balanced poise of a man in perfect training. Now, his arch-enemy was passing him, barely deigning even to glance down at him. Creek watched him till he had passed out of sight.

"Curse you," he muttered savagely, his face suddenly livid with passion, "curse you, and your would-be son-in-law, too! But, wait till to-night. I'll be even with the pair of you yet."

Then, with a murderous scowl upon his face, he rose abruptly from the seat and moved away in the opposite direction, with difficulty restraining his pace to that of a man of his apparent age.

A quarter-of-an-hour's slow, shambling walk brought him to Ilford station, where he booked for Liverpool Street. Having a few minutes to wait, he shuffled along to the deserted waiting-room, where he took the opportunity to remove his large gold-rimmed spectacles. They only troubled his eyes, and he felt that the need for this relatively unimportant detail of his disguise had passed. Soon he was alone in a third-class carriage, speeding towards the City, his brain busy with as foul a plot as ever brought man to a felon's death upon the gallows.

"Now for a quiet trip to East Finchley," he said to himself, as he puffed with feverish intensity at a cigarette. "I must make quite sure of my ground out there, the ground concerned in my supposed dream, and go over it for a second time. It will be pitch dark when we are out there to-night, and it is essential that I should know just where I am — above all when the job has been done and I have to make myself scarce with as little delay as possible. If I should chance to knock up against that young puppy Rutland he would never identify me — rigged out in this fashion and with an appropriate pose — either with Benjamin Creek or the Rev. Tobias Kidd. . . . Then, when I have satisfied myself that I shall be easily able to find my way in the dark to and from the spot that I have selected as favourable for my purpose, I can leisurely get back to the West-end and lie becomingly low until it's time to make tracks for Hyde Park Corner. It won't do for me to be seen going into my digs in this garb in broad daylight." (Creek's disguise, it may be explained, had been effected at the abode of a kindred spirit in a crime-infested back-street of Whitechapel.) "And I won't forget to make sure of a taxi-cab before the girl turns up, and I'll make it worth the chap's while to drive like the devil. Everything must be as nearly as possible just as it happened in my dream — my wonderful dream!"

Here Creek gave a sly grin and rubbed his long, bony hands together.

"There's a lot in that," he went on musingly. "The closer the resemblance to my dream, the bet-

ter my chance of taking her completely off her guard *at the right moment*. There must be no struggling — just one sure, swift stroke —”

Creek's features became suddenly tense and eager, and his attitude was that of a man who watches something being enacted before his very eyes. In a few moments, his expression changed to one of almost diabolical malevolence.

“Oh, Billy Knotts,” he muttered through his clenched teeth, “you’re going to pay dearly for that cruel hiding you gave me. Yes, I promise you that. Heavens, but I would give something to see your face, and the face of your daughter’s lover, when you learn the truth. . . . And the beauty of it all is,” he went on, now with a sinister smile, “I’ve laid my plans so cleverly that *I’m as safe as houses*.”

So thought the man whose criminal instincts were now dominated by a single, overmastering passion — the lust for revenge. The bogus John Rutland, whom he had thought to victimise so easily, had, as he believed, deliberately trapped him, and had been responsible for the most merciless thrashing he had ever received. For days and nights he had writhed in unspeakable physical agony; and for weeks since then he had harboured but one purpose in life: how best to pay off that bitter score. His evil nature had yielded him not a moment’s respite from the burning craving to be avenged, a craving that grew but stronger and more insistent with each hour’s delay. And so he had schemed and plotted with the thoroughness peculiar to him, preferring to endure the ceaseless torment that



must be his until his purpose was achieved. rather than risk the thwarting of his plans by undue haste.

And now, at last, he felt himself to be upon the eve of tasting the sweetness of revenge, a pleasure that was infinitely enhanced by the sense of security born of carefully matured plans.

Arriving at East Finchley by tube and tram from Liverpool Street, Creek duly covered the ground that was to play so important a part in the pending drama, and satisfied himself of his thorough acquaintance therewith. Then he retraced his steps and presently emerged from the narrow turning to which the taxi-cab was to bring him and his companion. Almost opposite to where he stood, and lying back a short distance from the roadway, was a quaint, old-fashioned public-house called "The Five Bells," and it occurred to Creek that he could make that his ostensible destination when he gave directions to the driver at Hyde Park Corner. Then, when the taxi-cab had driven away, he and his companion could make their way down the narrow turning he had described in his "dream."

"Not a bad idea to have a whisky-and-soda over the way," he said to himself. "I've done a thundering good morning's work, and a drink to the success of my plans will be appropriate."

With which cold-blooded reflection, and still mindful of his rôle of a feeble old man, Creek shuffled across the road and made his way into "The Five Bells." There was no one in the bar when he entered, so he rapped impatiently upon the counter.

In spite of his self-mastery, Creek was very

nearly betrayed into a startled exclamation of surprise, for the young man who appeared in answer to his summons was no other than his one-time confederate, Isaac Cohen, whom, it will be recalled, Creek (then posing as a reverend gentleman) had recently encountered in a Highgate-bound tram.

True to his long training, however, Creek played his assumed part with consummate coolness.

"A whisky-and-soda, please," he said in a voice that was an excellent imitation of the quavering tones peculiar to advanced age.

There was a single moment's intent scrutiny on the part of the young man behind the bar. It was the scrutiny of one who takes in details swiftly. Yet it was impossible to say whether it implied recognition, or was merely the outcome of an ill-bred, if momentary, curiosity at the somewhat antiquated appearance of the person on whom it was centred. Even the faint suspicion of a smile which for an instant hovered about the corners of a remarkably ugly mouth might have been as readily attributable to that lack of breeding as to any recollection of a previous acquaintance. Then, without a word, the young man turned to execute his customer's order, after which he started to polish some glasses with a display of energy that suggested commendable zeal for his work. He was a puny, impoverished-looking fellow, with a face that did not inspire confidence.

Creek did not linger unduly over his whisky-and-soda, and he quite forgot to drink to the success of his plans. As he set his tumbler down preparatory to taking his departure he shot a furtive glance at

the young man who was so busy with the glasses. It may have been mere coincidence that his glance should have intercepted one of equal stealth from the young man in question, but it set the black-mailer speculating uneasily as he shuffled slowly and somewhat feebly out of the bar.

"Curse it," he muttered to himself when he was outside, "I wonder if the fellow recognised me. I don't think he can have done, but he's a deep dog and there's no saying for certain. Who would have thought of meeting him in such a place as that! Probably that accounts for my seeing him the other day in the Highgate tram — he would have been on some errand for the boss, no doubt. I suppose he's turned respectable all of a sudden — for some black purpose of his own."

And there being no one to observe him, Creek permitted himself a venomous sneer.

Then he remembered his gold-rimmed spectacles which he had removed at Ilford station and had not since thought it necessary to resume. "That's a pity," he muttered thoughtfully. "Not that they make much difference in themselves, but they fit in well with the part I have assumed and would have helped to make recognition more difficult. . . . Still, I can't think the fellow was quite clever enough to see through this disguise, spectacles or no spectacles. He would have said something if he had, for I'll bet he hasn't forgotten his old grudge against me. . . . Ha, ha! *That* was another clever bit of business on my part. But it was a flea-bite to the job I have on hand to-night!"

Let us turn our attention now from Creek, im-

mersed in his sordid soliloquy, to the other interested party in the grim drama, the details of which had been so carefully thought out by the vengeful blackmailer.

After leaving him in the park, Miss Knotts had gone home in a state of mind that even more than justified Creek's gloating satisfaction at the success of his scheme. Doubtless, her own secret misgivings concerning the stability of her lover's affections — a factor unsuspected by the pseudo-professor — had been a contributory cause to her unquestioned acceptance of his dream as a prophetic revelation. Even now as she made her way home, deep in thought, she could scarcely realise the full significance of the amazing thing that had just happened. A total stranger, a man whom she had never seen before and in whom she had not the remotest interest, chancing to sit beside her on a seat in a public park, had suddenly recognised her as having figured in his dream of overnight, and had abruptly riveted her attention by naming the very place in which her lover lived. Then, too, it was extraordinarily suggestive that the dream should have started at Hyde Park Corner above all places — the very spot where her lover had first failed her. Every detail of the dream had seemed to fit in exactly with the facts, even to the naming of her lover. As for that uncanny trance into which the professor had lapsed and in the course of which he had actually given a faithful description of her lover — well, that was too horribly significant for anything. There was not the shadow of a doubt in Miss Knotts' mind that her lover would

fail to fulfil his engagement with her that evening, and that he would be occupied as foretold in the dream. She was equally convinced that the object of his illicit affection was no other than the young lady concerning whom she had entertained such jealous misgivings that very morning.

And to-night, at ten o'clock, he would be making love to her in the quiet fields that bordered East Finchley!

The mere thought of it drove her into a fierce frenzy of jealousy, and kindled within her but one purpose — to surprise him in the very act and to denounce him, there and then, before the girl to whom he was making love. It did, indeed, occur to Miss Knotts to invoke the aid of her pugilistic father and induce him to accompany her to East Finchley, but the recollection of the professor's warning regarding the intervention of a third party and the consequent "breaking of the spell," as he termed it, caused her to dismiss the idea. Moreover, she very much doubted whether her matter-of-fact father would not treat the whole affair as preposterous, and sternly forbid her embarking on such an undertaking. On the other hand, when in due course she came to disclose to him what she would have seen with her own eyes, she knew very well that no power on earth would stop him from taking the matter into his own hands and dealing with her erstwhile lover precisely as he had dealt with the fickle Frank Thompson.

No, she reflected as she neared her home, she must keep her own counsel, conceal for the moment as best she could her outraged feelings, and carry

out the plan which she had briefly outlined to Professor Deepstone. Her projected visit to her aunt at South Kensington that afternoon would occasion no surprise to her unsuspecting parents, neither would the subsequent receipt of a telegram announcing that she was remaining there for the night cause them any uneasiness; whilst the justification for the subterfuge would be sufficiently apparent when she came to disclose all the facts on the morrow. As for having any qualms of her own concerning her joint undertaking with an old gentleman whose acquaintance she had made under such unusual circumstances, Miss Knotts' self-reliant nature, coupled with the fixity of her determination, admitted of no second thoughts.

And the assumption of tranquility and calm with which she presently made her way up the garden path of Oakfield Lodge was at once a tribute to her self-possession and her ability to play the part she had set herself.

Towards ten o'clock that night, a young man of somewhat puny physique and by no means prepossessing appearance might have been seen reclining indolently on a seat which stood a few yards in front of "The Five Bells" public-house at East Finchley.

It was Isaac Cohen, just returned from a walk across Hampstead Heath, this being his weekly "evening off." And as he was under no obligation to be within doors before eleven o'clock he had elected to make the most of the fine evening and smoke his final pipe out here.

His face, crafty as that of an old fox, wore a perplexed and pre-occupied expression.

"I don't know what to make of it," he muttered to himself, "but it's a dead cert. he's on some deep game of his own. That's the second time I've seen him in this neighbourhood, differently disguised each time, though on both occasions he was the feeble old man — a part which he always played uncommonly well. He thinks I didn't twig him — the miserable hound — but he doesn't know I made it my business, after that last dirty trick he played me, to study his disguises. . . . Ah, Benjamin Creek, my boy, it may pay me to lie low at the moment, but I'll get my own back on you yet, one of these days. And when I do —" Cohen's face became suddenly dark with passion — "when I do, you low-down mongrel, I'll wager it will be a black day for you."

For some minutes, Cohen remained deep in thought, his small, narrow chin buried in his breast.

He was too immersed in his reflections to notice the swift approach of a taxi-cab, but its somewhat abrupt pulling up at a spot only a few yards from where he was seated caused him to give a casual sidelong glance in its direction.

A well-dressed girl alighted with a haste that savoured of impatience. Turning briskly to the driver, she handed him his fare, which, judging from his gracious acknowledgment, must have been on a generous scale. Meanwhile, there clambered from the cab, somewhat slowly and feebly, a quaintly-garbed, bespectacled old gentleman. Then the cab drove off as swiftly as it had come.

Isaac Cohen held his breath, and a hard glitter came suddenly into his crafty eyes. It spoke volumes for his training in the art of self-repression that he gave no other sign of interest in this oddly-assorted couple. Indeed, it would almost have seemed as though such interest as he might have felt had already ceased, for he turned deliberately and gazed with languid apathy in the opposite direction. In spite, however, of averted face and seeming lack of interest, his keen ears were very much on duty.

He heard the young woman exclaim in a curiously tense undertone, "There's the very turning you described!" "Yes, so it is," her companion assented, "*the very turning!*"

And in another moment Cohen heard the old man's shuffling steps mingling with the lighter tread of the maiden as they crossed the road and made their way down the narrow turning opposite.

Cohen remained motionless for some moments while he listened to the sound of the retreating footsteps. Then he rose with an alacrity that suggested a settled purpose.

"Blimey! *What* a slice of luck!" he muttered as he followed warily and at a safe distance. His small, pinched face wore now an expression of extraordinary keenness. "It strikes me," he went on to himself, "there ought to be a thumping good chance of paying off my old score out of this little affair to-night. I don't know what his game is, masquerading as an old man with that young girl, and I don't much care, but I'll lay it's a fishy job, and I'm going to butt in at the right moment. And



if there's money in it, *I shall want my share*. I wonder what the crafty devil has done with the stick he was leaning on this morning? I noticed just now that he hadn't got it. Wants his hands free to-night, eh? That's what *that* means!"

Still at a safe distance, and with a stealth that seemed curiously natural to him, Isaac Cohen dogged the steps of the two figures ahead of him. The narrow turning which they were now traversing was little better than a mere footpath, connecting the quiet roadway with the fields beyond, and extending for a distance of some two or three hundred yards between high fences. In places the outspreading branches of trees overhung it so closely as to make its darkness at night-time almost like that of a tunnel. Even Cohen's keen eyes were of little avail here, but he was ever within sound of the footsteps that he dogged.

When he reached the field into which the narrow turning led he paused within the shadow of the fence, and peered ahead. Though it was a dark night, there was just sufficient moon to redeem it from total blackness, and he could now faintly descry the gaunt form of his one-time confederate and the slight figure of the girl by his side. They were plodding steadily on, as though to a fixed destination, and Cohen crept after them, his eyes and ears strained to the utmost.

Presently, they came to a stile and it became evident that Creek was duly mindful of his rôle of a feeble old man, for there was a little delay while he clambered slowly over before turning to assist his companion.

"*The very stile. How strange!*" Cohen heard him exclaim in tones almost of awe. "It's all coming true to the very letter."

Cohen, with the stealth that seemed to come natural to him, was crouching motionless now behind a low-growing bush. "What the devil *does* it mean?" he muttered. "Looks as though he'd been on the tack of some cock-and-bull story. *But what for?*"

Then he saw the two figures turn sharp to the right along a path that was screened by a hedge from the field they had just left. He waited a few moments before he got over the stile himself, and then with infinite caution he resumed his stalking tactics.

Save for those two dim, shadowy forms ahead there was not a soul to be seen, and Cohen reflected that whatever his former confederate's game might be he had evidently chosen his ground with a view to solitude. He slightly lessened the distance between him and his prey—as he now regarded Creek—and his ferret eyes never left him.

With all his faculties alert to the utmost and his pulses throbbing with suppressed excitement at the prospect of an early paying off of that old score, Cohen continued to stalk with the sinuous stealth of a cat.

He was just beginning to wonder how much farther his prey intended to proceed, when the two shadowy figures came to an abrupt pause. They were talking in low tones, and the taller figure was pointing towards a clump of trees near by.

Cohen dropped to his hands and knees, and with

head turned down that the pallor of his face might not betray his presence crawled warily nearer. Now his sharp ears caught snatches of conversation. "Yes, this is the very spot. I recognise it," he heard Creek declare in muffled tones; and there was a tensely-whispered but inaudible reply from the girl by his side.

Suddenly, Creek pointed again towards the clump of trees. "There they are!" he whispered excitedly, "exactly as I saw them in my dream. Just a dark patch on the ground over there — with two lighter patches close together — their faces. Look!"

His companion leant forward in an attitude the eagerness of which was apparent even in the dark to Cohen's keenly watchful eyes.

Then something happened with amazing suddenness.

There was a swift outward and downward movement of Creek's arm, terminating in the back of his companion, and the latter fell face forward without a sound.

"Stabbed to death," hissed Creek exultingly as he bent over the prostrate and motionless figure at his feet. "And never a sound! A clean enough job that."

Isaac Cohen rose stealthily to his feet, his gaze riveted on that bent, shadowy figure that seemed now to bear a weird resemblance to a gaunt vulture hovering hungrily over a prospective meal.

"So *that's* your game, Benjamin Creek, is it?" he said in cold, menacing tones. "You'd scarcely bargained for *me* as a witness, eh?"

The bent, shadowy figure straightened, but even the obscurity of night could not hide the paralysis of fear that had suddenly smitten it. Its grotesque outlines were those of a man whose knees knocked together in overwhelming terror, whilst its very silence seemed to belong to one deprived of speech by an overmastering fear.

Cohen, gloating secretly over the effect he had produced, advanced to within a pace of the panic-stricken figure.

"*What* a chance," he said with slow, insinuating emphasis, "for me to pay off old scores, eh, Creek? And — *I'm going to, you —*"

But the sentence was never finished.

As though the very extremity of his fear had suddenly galvanised him into life again, Creek sprang at his one-time confederate with the fury of a tiger, and something that his hand still clutched descended like a flash into Cohen's breast.

A spurt of blood — a half-stifled groan.

Then stillness and silence.

## CHAPTER XV

### IF —

CREEK glanced fearfully about him, as though half dreading that out of the dark void that surrounded him might emerge yet another witness to the foul deed that he had done.

It was no mere sense of horror at his two-fold crime that for a moment unnerved the vengeful blackmailer and brought the cold sweat of fear to his brow. Remorse, or anything akin to it, was an attribute unknown to Creek. But that cold, menacing voice that had spoken to him so suddenly from out of the darkness, that accusing figure that had loomed upon him from the blackness of the night with such uncanny stealth, had sent a shiver of deadly fear through him as he realised how near to betrayal he had been.

With a strong effort he pulled himself together, and the coolness of nerve that was inherent in him came to his aid. His first act was to plunge the blade of his knife into the ground at his feet as the speediest method of ridding it of the blood that was still wet upon it. "There's no time to lose," he muttered grimly as he thrust it into an inner pocket and gave another swift glance about him. "I must drag the bodies away from the path, and make myself scarce."

Ruthlessly he grabbed by the coat collar the

mute, motionless form that lay huddled at his feet, and was about to carry out his intention when his keen ears caught a sound — faint but ominous — that again sent an icy chill through his veins. Still clutching his victim's coat-collar, he stood rooted to the spot — listening intently.

There was no mistaking it. Footsteps were approaching, and were drawing rapidly nearer.

For an instant, something very like panic took possession of the murderer. He dropped his burden and fled precipitately in the opposite direction to that from which the warning sound came. Luckily for him, this took him over ground with which he was already familiar, and he had soon gained the narrow turning that led from the fields to the roadway. Here the darkness of night was rendered impenetrable by the overhanging branches of trees.

Creek slowed down, and his hands moved deftly about him.

When he emerged upon the roadway a curious transformation in his appearance had taken place. He was no longer the bent old man, who had shuffled along so feebly beside an eager maiden. Erect and active, he strode boldly forward with easy, swinging strides and a certain jauntiness of bearing utterly at variance with his former gait. The soft felt hat beneath which his whitened hair had shown so plainly had given place to a large, loose cap of sporting type, which was pulled down over his head in a way that concealed almost every trace of hair. The gold-rimmed spectacles were gone, and the very expression of his features seemed to have changed.

In short, Creek had executed, with a speed and dexterity that would not have disgraced a music-hall comedian, a sort of "quick-change" turn of his own, a ruse that had served him admirably on more than one occasion in his criminal career.

Let us leave Creek now as he pursues his homeward way, exulting over his act of vengeance, and see who it was whose approaching footsteps had caused him to bolt so precipitately from the scene of his ghastly crime.

It was, indeed, no other than Dick Dashmead, returning to East Finchley from his favourite walk across the Heath. He pulled up abruptly as he came full tilt upon the two huddled and motionless forms.

"Hullo, what's up here?" he exclaimed in startled tones. He struck a match and peered down at the form that lay nearest to him. He saw it to be that of a young woman, lying face downwards. Hastily, yet gently, he turned it over. The match had flickered out, and he struck another.

"Good God!" he ejaculated in sudden horror, "*it's Miss Knotts!*"

For an instant he had a vague idea that he must be dreaming. Here, lying at his feet and seemingly dead, was the very girl of whom, let it be confessed, he had been thinking but a moment since. Then he touched the cheek of the upturned face, and the warmth that was still upon it brought home to him vividly the reality of that upon which he gazed. Living or dead, it was indeed she of whom he had just been thinking.

But Miss Knotts was not dead. Creek's cruel,

swift stab in the dark had been less sure than he had supposed and had missed its mark. Moreover, though he had not realised it, the girl had, by a lucky chance, in leaning forward the better to see the imaginary couple at whom Creek had pointed, slightly stumbled precisely as the murderous weapon struck her, with the result that the actual penetration had been far less than he had imagined. It was more the shock than serious injury that had reduced Miss Knotts to insensibility. Her escape, indeed, had been miraculous.

And now, as Dick Dashmead felt eagerly for the heart-throb that should tell him there was yet life, and passionately breathed her name, Miss Knotts to his great relief opened her eyes. Her presence of mind and quick grasp of the situation were remarkable, but Miss Knotts came of stout-nerved, hardy stock.

"Where's that man — the coward who struck me down?" she queried in tones that were almost peremptory. "I've been stabbed."

In the darkness she had not recognised Dick Dashmead.

"Good heavens, Miss Knotts!" exclaimed that young man, horror-stricken. "Are you seriously hurt?"

"Oh, it's Mr. Dashmead!"—smiling faintly. "What a mercy *you* have appeared on the scene. . . . No, I don't think I'm hurt very seriously. I scarcely know yet."

With Dick's assistance, she had risen to a sitting position, when a low groan near by caused them both to look around.



"Why!" exclaimed Miss Knotts in astonishment as she caught sight for the first time of that other recumbent form, "that must be him — the treacherous, cowardly old man who stabbed me."

"No, no," said a feeble voice, as though with a great effort, "he's gone. But — I saw him do it. That's why — he stabbed me, too. I — I know him. . . . His name —

The voice had dropped to tones that were barely above a whisper, and Dick, gently releasing the girl whom he had been supporting in his arms, bent low over the prostrate man. Faintly he caught the name — "Ben Creek."

Even to Dick's inexperienced eye it was evident that the speaker was near his end, and a fresh wave of horror swept over him.

"Tell me," he said, speaking very earnestly, "tell me, if you can, where this fellow Ben Creek lives."

There was a moment's tense pause before the dying man's lips moved again.

"Palmer Street — 97 Palmer Street — Pimlico." The words came slowly and very faintly, and Dick had to bend lower yet to catch them.

He had barely repeated this address, the better to impress it upon his memory, when he heard the welcome sound of approaching footsteps, and in a few moments a young man pulled up as abruptly as Dick had done himself.

"There has been trouble here," said Dick briefly. "Lend a hand."

"Right-o! I'm your man," responded the new

arrival with an alacrity that suggested zest for any fresh excitement. "What's happened?" And he bent down enquiringly. "Lumme!" he ejaculated as he struck a match, "I'll bet that chap's dead."

"I think you're right," said Dick gravely. "He has been stabbed. So has this young lady, but I don't think she is very seriously injured. Help me to get her to my friend's house, near by."

This, however, proved to be none too easy a task, for, notwithstanding her plucky protestations, Miss Knotts was weak from loss of blood and scarcely able to stand. Between them, however, Dick and the stranger succeeded in getting her to John Rutland's quarters, where Mrs. Woodford, despite many a murmured, "Ah me! Oh dear, what terrible goings-on, to be sure!" yet proved herself capable and motherly, and soon had the young lady safely installed in bed. John himself was out, not having yet returned from his customary visit to Ilford, and Gladys was therefore despatched for the nearest doctor; whilst Dick, accompanied by the young man with a taste for excitement, hastened to the local police station to set the machinery of the law in motion.

At a somewhat late hour that night Benjamin Creek climbed the dark stairway that led up to his modest abode on the fourth floor of the Pimlico lodginghouse. He closed and locked the door noiselessly behind him and proceeded to light a small oil lamp that stood upon a table in the centre of the room. Its yellow rays lit up a smile of evil

satisfaction on his face. His next act was to pour himself out a stiff glass of whisky, which he drained at a gulp.

"My only regret," he muttered to himself as he set the glass down, "is that I can't see for myself the effect of what I have done on the girl's father and her lover. . . . Ah, that *would* give me a thrill, indeed! Never mind, I can just about imagine it. Ha, ha, Billy Knotts and bogus John Rutland," he apostrophized gleefully, "I said I'd make you smart, and by G —, I've kept my word. . . . Lord, what a masterpiece I am at scheming! I may be slow, and perhaps I pursue my purpose by round-about methods, *but I'm devilish sure!*"

Creek had sat down now, and the process of self-hugging in which he had indulged in Valentine's Park that morning was repeated, with an ecstasy that was almost diabolical.

"Everything has gone exactly as I planned," he went on to himself with the same unholy glee. "Except, it is true, for the unexpected butting in of that miserable spy, Isaac Cohen. And I soon settled *him*! Lord, but what a fright he gave me for a moment! It's a mercy for me that I've got a cool nerve, or Cohen would have lived to blow the gaff on me, as sure as fate."

Creek's face became suddenly thoughtful, and a moment later the shadow of fear flitted across it.

"I suppose I *did* do him in properly," he muttered to himself uneasily. "I should be in mortal danger if —. And yet I can't believe that possible. *I stabbed with all my might.* . . . No, no, Isaac

Cohen, you've paid the penalty of meddling with Benjamin Creek, right enough."

None the less, as though some grim foreboding haunted him, Creek rose from his seat and began to pace restlessly to and fro, his head sunk upon his breast. That dread possibility, remote enough as it seemed, had suddenly impinged itself upon his mind and would not be entirely dislodged. Strange, he thought to himself, that it had not struck him sooner. Instead, throughout his homeward journey, there had been a sense only of wild exultation, a delirium of inhuman delight, at the achievement of his act of vengeance, and through his fevered brain had come no hint of lurking danger to himself. On the contrary, a brazen boldness and confidence had possessed him, and he recalled now how, as he had emerged from the narrow turning that led from the fields to the roadway, he had chanced to encounter a policeman on his beat and had met his momentary scrutiny with easy unconcern.

But he was cooler now. The wild exultation had subsided, and he could view the matter more critically. For some minutes, he continued to pace restlessly to and fro, reviewing every detail of what had happened in the lonely field at East Finchley. And as he did so another possibility occurred to him, and one that he found peculiarly mortifying. Suppose *Miss Knotts* should survive, and thus rob him of his coveted revenge. True, it was a very small chance, and one that presented less danger to himself than the other dread possibility that had

just occurred to him, but the bare contemplation of the chance brought to Creek's cadaverous features the look of a wild beast robbed suddenly of its prey.

"Curse that fellow Cohen!" he muttered savagely. "If it hadn't been for him I could have made sure of that, anyway. Those few moments lost in dealing with him were vital, and by the time I had settled him I had to fly for my life.

"But it strikes me I am worrying myself quite needlessly. They're both as dead as nails. And if that's so — well there's nothing to fear."

But it was that "if," with all its grim possibilities, that haunted Creek. He realised now, in the solitude of his den, that it meant just life or death to him.

He paused in his restless pacing to light a cigarette.

As he did so, the light from the match threw something into bold relief that sent a shudder through him.

*It was on the sleeve of his shirt — vivid and accusing! . . . Yes, and there was another, smaller and less conspicuous by reason of its darker background, on the sleeve of his coat. He dropped the lighted match, and felt that on which his startled gaze had rested. . . . Yes, it was still moist!*

Again that menacing "if" crept into Creek's tortured mind, and fanned the smouldering fears already there.

In another moment, he was removing with feverish haste his coat, his waistcoat, and his shirt.

"It's no good taking any chances," he muttered

to himself as he poured out some water into a basin. "The shirt first! It shows most on that. . . . I wonder if soap and water will get it out. . . . Curse that fellow Cohen for his butting in! I'd have been as safe as houses if it hadn't been for him. Probably I'm safe enough as 'tis, but —

"Then there's the knife to think about," he went on to himself in a kind of feverish soliloquy as he began to scrub away at that ominous scarlet patch. "I'll have to find a way of disposing of that. I half wish I'd thrown it away at the time. But weapons, they say, are apt to prove useful clues! Ugh! . . . To think it's in the pocket of that coat now. If — if —"

Creek, still assiduously washing the sleeve of his shirt, became suddenly aware of footsteps on the stairs — the bottom flight of stairs. It sounded like the tread of two or three people. Now they had mounted the first flight and were climbing the second, and Creek's keen ears recognised the foremost tread as that of Mrs. Tozer, his landlady. In the excitement of his washing operations he had not noticed any knock at the street door, and he strove to tell himself that Mrs. Tozer was only showing some belated and newly arrived lodgers to their room. Yet for the life of him he could not keep back a sickening, nameless fear — a deadly premonition of something untoward. With his hands still buried in the basin of water — and how ominously tinged already that water was! — he remained rooted to the spot where he stood, listening in fascinated horror to those approaching footsteps.

Heavens, they had ascended the third flight of

stairs, and were now climbing the *fourth and last!*

There was but one room besides his own on the floor to which that flight led, and Creek knew that that room was already occupied.

The paralysis of an overwhelming fear gripped Creek and held him impotent. Even his mental powers seemed for the moment to be steeped in a fatal stupor. Dimly, as in a dream, he heard his landlady say, "That's Mr. Creek's room, gentlemen." Then the handle of the locked door was turned, and a moment later there was a knock and a curt demand that the door should be opened.

The paralysing spell that had numbed the murderer's brain and limbs was broken now, and a wild panic seized him. He dashed to the window and flung it open. A succession of small backyards, hidden in black obscurity, lay far beneath him.

Creek knew that the only possible chance of escape lay — down there. It was a small enough chance, but a man whose neck is at stake will accept almost any odds. Already the violent pressure on the door of his room warned him that his unseen pursuers might burst in at any instant, and Creek, in his mad panic, was even tempted to risk the forty-foot drop to the paved yard below. But his quick eye caught sight of a stout water-pipe that led down to the very ground, and he leant out at a dangerous angle in a frantic effort to reach it. A blasphemous oath leaped from his lips when he discovered it was just beyond his grasp. He *must* — he *would* reach it, and mad with terror he leant yet further out, a black abyss yawning beneath him.

Ah, he had got it!

Now for a steady, mighty heave.

It was a perilous moment, indeed, for Creek. The slightest slip, and he must inevitably fall headlong into that paved yard forty feet below. But that terrible battering on the door of his room made him desperate, and in another moment he was balancing himself full length across the sill of the window and preparing to swing himself completely out. The long lean fingers of his right hand were gripped about the water-pipe like an iron vice. But, strong and agile to an exceptional degree as he was, it was yet a sufficiently hazardous undertaking to daunt the nerve of all but the most desperate.

A loud rending, crashing sound behind him told him that the door of his room had been burst open.

Creek almost leapt through the window in a last, despairing effort to elude his pursuers. Another fraction of a second and he would have put to the test his only possible chance of escape.

But two pairs of powerful hands were already gripping his ankles, and an upward and backward heave forced him to release his hold of the water-pipe.

For one dreadful instant he was literally hanging head downwards. Yet, such was his overwhelming fear of the consequences of his crime that death upon the stones of that yard far below was something to be fought for. And Creek did fight for it — savagely and wildly.

But a juster fate was in store for him, and a few moments later he was back in his room again, securely handcuffed. A burly detective stood on



either side of him. Facing him was a uniformed Inspector of police.

"You are charged," said the latter, in cold formal tones, "with the wilful murder of Isaac Cohen and with the attempted murder of Miss Florence Knotts."

## CHAPTER XVI

### THREE MONTHS AFTER

THREE months had passed since Creek's arrest — three months of pregnant happenings for all concerned within the purview of this story.

John Rutland, still resident at East Finchley, was now well-established in a City merchant's office, with every prospect of winning for himself a position of responsibility and trust. This was fortunate for John in more ways than one, since the firm of solicitors who had had the management of the estate from which he derived his income, Messrs. Shark, Cordfast & Co. of Lincoln's Inn Fields, had come to grief, and the income was consequently no longer available. To do him justice, however, this circumstance, which most young men would probably have regarded as disastrous, did not weigh unduly upon John, for he had never been able to escape certain conscientious scruples on the score of drawing money which he felt was not rightly his. His naturally self-reliant disposition made him glad to feel he was now entirely dependent upon his own efforts and standing, as it were, upon his own bottom.

But, what was of far more consequence to him was the fact that he was no longer forced to play the part of an unwilling and recalcitrant lover. And the curious thing was that this, to him, mo-

mentous change in his lot had, after all, been brought about quite simply, and as much through the intervention of Fate as by his own efforts. It was doubtless a well-disposed Fate that was responsible for Dick Dashmead's highly important rôle in the drama that had been enacted in the lonely field at East Finchley, for had he chanced to return from that favourite tramp of his on the memorable evening in question by any other route it is quite likely that an ill-starred engagement would in due course have merged into a marriage that must inevitably have proved unhappy. As it was, however, Dick had not only been instrumental in bringing a murderer to justice, but he had rendered such timely aid to Miss Knotts herself as to win the deep and lasting gratitude of that young lady's parents. And there is no doubt that the chance circumstance that Dick had been led to play the part of a hero towards Miss Knotts, synchronising as it did with that young lady's misgivings concerning her fiancé's affections, tended to exalt him in her estimation, and was thus an important contributory cause of subsequent developments. For although her worst suspicions regarding her fiancé had not been confirmed, her conviction that his sentiments towards her were no longer those of a lover remained as strong as ever.

So much for the part played by Fate in effecting John's release from his irksome engagement. Now for that played by John himself. He, perhaps unconsciously, had adopted the very course that was best calculated to achieve his purpose. No sooner had Miss Knotts recovered from her injuries —

which had, happily, proved not very serious — than John had gone straight to his then prospective father-in-law and had made a clean breast of everything. In plain, manly terms he had disclosed the strange circumstances which had led to his impersonation of the original John Rutland; with equal candour he had confessed that the engagement, the responsibility for which he had thereby assumed, had proved distasteful to him; and he had gone on to admit quite frankly that he felt that the part he had played had been unworthy of him. Mr. Knotts had listened in silence to John's extraordinary statement, puffing meditatively the while at one of his big cigars. Nor was the silence broken for some minutes after John had ceased to speak. That young man had expected something in the nature of a volcanic outburst of wrath, and it was with secret astonishment that he watched the burly ex-prizefighter puffing imperturbably at his cigar with an expression that suggested nothing more ominous than a profundity of thought. "Humph," Mr. Knotts had presently grunted, "rum go, John. I must have a word with the missis about this." And for some minutes John had been left alone with feelings that were not unlike those of a prisoner anxiously awaiting the verdict of a jury.

Now, whether Mrs. Knotts, with feminine intuition, had already a clearer perception of the true state of affairs than her husband, and possibly therefore welcomed John's frank confession as opportune, is a point with which we need not concern ourselves, but there is no doubt that her attitude in the matter — which was one of sympathy for all the

parties concerned, not forgetting Dick Dashmead — was not without its influence upon her worthy husband. The upshot of it all was that the engagement had, by mutual consent, been terminated, a circumstance of which, it is perhaps needless to say, the enterprising Dick Dashmead had not been slow to take advantage, with a view to the advancement of his own suit.

And now a word as to the wretched Creek, to whom the three months that had passed had proved of grim and momentous consequence indeed. Charged with the murder of Isaac Cohen and the attempted murder of Miss Knotts, he had been remanded on several successive occasions owing to the inability of Miss Knotts, one of the principal witnesses for the prosecution, to attend. In due course, however, the magisterial enquiry was concluded and Creek was committed to stand his trial at the ensuing sessions at the Old Bailey.

The trial, which lasted several days, proved sensational and dramatic in the extreme, and aroused widespread public interest. The prisoner was defended by the great criminal lawyer, Sir Anthony Cruiser, who employed all the arts of his profession to shake the testimony of the witnesses for the prosecution, but in spite of all his efforts the chain of evidence, though circumstantial, was complete and overwhelming, and the jury returned a verdict of Guilty. It was characteristic of Creek that he should have received this with wild protestations of innocence, and that he should have whined piteously for mercy when the judge, in a few solemn and impressive words, duly passed sentence of

death upon him. It was further characteristic of him that his desire to be avenged should have remained with him to the last in spite of the certainty of his own fate. Creek felt that he still held one card up his sleeve which could be played to the discomfiture of the bogus John Rutland, and he resolved to play it. A few days after the conclusion of his trial he handed to Sir Anthony Cruiser — from whom he received periodic visits at the prison whilst awaiting his execution — a long letter addressed to Mr. Knotts, denouncing John Rutland as an impostor, and disclosing the circumstances whereby he, Creek, became aware of that young man's impersonation of the original John Rutland.

Vindictive to the very threshold of death's gateway, a smile of evil satisfaction lit up his sallow features when once the letter that was to bring exposure and disgrace to his bitterest enemy was fairly on its way. Creek's feelings, therefore, can perhaps be better imagined than described when, some two or three days later, Sir Anthony reported to him that he had handed the letter to Mr. Knotts, who had told him that the fact of John Rutland's impersonation was already known to him, that young man having himself made a full and frank disclosure, a course which Mr. Knotts had characterized as manly and commendable in every way. It need scarcely be said that it was a bitter pill to Creek to learn that his final shaft had fallen harmlessly.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned, Creek's letter had proved of peculiar interest to John, to whom its

contents were duly disclosed, as it at once made clear to him the fabric of malicious falsehood concerning the alleged episode at Bedford by means of which the blackmailer had sought to extort money from him.

And now, on a certain bright December morning, the hero of this story received a letter the perusal of which caused him such astonishment that he had to read it through a second time before he could fully grasp its significance. It bore the address of a small town near Winnipeg, Canada, and read as follows:

My Dear John,

I daresay you have often wondered what has become of the young man into whose shoes you stepped only a few months ago under circumstances that seemed more like a page from a very improbable story than real life. I have often heard it said that truth is stranger than fiction, and I think when you have read this letter you will agree with me that it is.

Well, to start from the beginning, when I left you I decided that I might as well assume the name you had relinquished as any other, and so it was in the name of Fred Stormont that I booked my steerage passage to Montreal, and it is in that name that I have been known ever since, and — let me add — intend to remain known for the rest of my life, in spite of what I am about to unfold to you. For a few weeks after my arrival I had a pretty rough time looking for work, and I don't mind telling you

that I often thought of you and the hardships you must have endured before that memorable day when we exchanged identities.

Then a chance circumstance altered everything. Passing through a low part of the town late one night, I happened to be able to render assistance to an elderly, well-dressed man who was being set upon by a couple of "toughs" (as they are called in these parts) and whose object was evidently robbery. I need not go into details, but the upshot of it was that, as a token of gratitude for my rescue, as he was pleased to term it, this gentleman secured a job for me on the farm of a friend of his out here, a Mr. Harding, and insisted on paying my fare — a pretty considerable item where distances are so great. Accordingly, out here I came and have been ever since, and I may say at once that I am extremely comfortable and happy with Mr. and Mrs. Harding, who treat me very well.

Now I come to the astonishing part of my story. Yesterday an old friend of the Hardings, a Mrs. Jasper, who lives in a small prairie town some miles from here, came to spend a few days with the Hardings. Well, imagine my feelings when, upon being introduced to this lady, she exclaimed, after regarding me for a moment in obvious amazement, "*Oh, Fred, don't you remember me?*"

Now, I am not going to trouble you with all that followed as it would make too long a story, but it turns out that this Mrs. Jasper was formerly a Miss Durnstone, and that at the time of my birth she was employed as nurse by my parents. To my aston-



ishment I learn that I was one of twins, a brother having been born a few minutes after me. He was christened Frederick.

Yes, John,— for I may as well continue to call you by that name — *you and I are twins*, and Mrs. Jasper tells me that you were given formally into her charge a fortnight after our birth, and I understand that you remained in her charge until you were fourteen years of age. Though I cannot remember our mother, she having died when I was about a year old, the little that I can recall of our father gives me the impression that he must have been a man of some eccentricity of character, and it may have been that this was responsible for the course he chose to adopt. Mrs. Jasper tells me that you will easily be able to verify the facts concerning your birth on application to Somerset House, and I have no doubt that in your own interests you will do so.

No wonder we were so puzzled at our extraordinary resemblance, eh? And yet, had it not been for a little oversight on my part, namely, that of acquainting you with the date of my birthday (shocking omission this, though perhaps it is not to be altogether wondered at when we remember how hurriedly the exchange was effected) — had it not been for this omission I think we must have guessed the truth, because we should, of course, have discovered that our respective birthdays were on the same day.

Well, John, I want you to write and tell me all about yourself and how you have been getting on all this time. And especially I want to hear how your

engagement to Miss Knotts is progressing. I wish you the very best of luck. Believe me,

Your affectionate brother,

FRED STORMONT.

P. S. I have no intention of ever returning to England, and you may be interested to hear that I have become engaged to Mr. and Mrs. Harding's daughter Delia, to whom I hope to be married next summer.

Having concluded the reading of the foregoing for the second time, John put the letter down and gave vent to a soft, low whistle expressive of unbounded amazement.

"Well, that licks everything," he muttered. "So we're twins, are we? . . . What an extraordinary coincidence that this chap—I mean my brother—should have chanced to knock up against Miss Durnstone. I remember, of course, that the last I heard of her was that she had gone out to Canada, but I never dreamt for a moment of their ever meeting. Oh, well, I don't know that it will make much difference, except that I can now feel that I have at least a right to the name of Rutland, and I guess I may as well continue to be known as John. I see that my twin brother has appropriated my old name and is going to stick to it, but as he evidently intends remaining abroad there's not much fear of our getting mixed up."

And John smiled to himself as he put the letter in his pocket preparatory to hurrying off to the City.

That evening he showed the letter to Gladys, who

read it with profound interest. A happy understanding existed now between these two young people.

"Oh, how wonderful it seems, John dear," she exclaimed when she had finished reading the letter. Then, with a mischievous smile, she added, "So you're not such an impostor after all! What a good job I persuaded you not to abandon your impersonation when I discovered your secret. Now, isn't it?"

John's method of expressing his entire agreement with this sentiment was convincing even though it lacked words, for it consisted of a true lover's embrace.

"Do you know," he said presently, "I saw Dick Dashmead in the City to-day. He's getting on fine in his new job, and — this is what I wanted to tell you — *he's to be married to Miss Knotts!* Yes, and he said that Mr. and Mrs. Knotts hoped you and I would be present at the happy event. Now, what do you think of that?"

It is curious with what frequency and upon how slight a pretext two lovers will find occasion to embrace. Apparently there was something in the announcement that John had just made for which mere verbal comment was inadequate. At all events, he and Gladys were again clasped in each other's arms a moment later when Mrs. Woodford made a somewhat ill-timed entry into the room.

"Oh dear," she murmured sadly, yet with a faint hint of amusement behind her words, "what goings-on, to be sure! Ah well, never mind, I suppose 'tis the way of the world. I remember that

your poor dear father and I used to do exactly the same sort of thing—long, long years ago. But that was when we were courting. We didn't do it afterwards." Then she added with enigmatical abruptness, "Well, I'm glad they've hanged the scoundrel, for he richly deserved his fate."

That these somewhat startling words did not refer in any way to her late spouse was quickly apparent from the gesture with which the good lady indicated the evening paper which she held in her hand. "Read that, Mr. Rutland," she said, pointing to a brief paragraph in the front page.

And John read as follows:

### CREEK HANGED

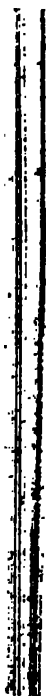
Benjamin Creek was hanged at Pentonville Prison this morning for the murder of Isaac Cohen at East Finchley on the night of the 5th September last.

There was a considerable gathering of people outside the prison gates when the bell began to toll. A little later a warder posted two notices on the prison door, one the Sheriff's declaration that the law had been duly vindicated, and the other a statement by Dr. Jones, the prison medical officer, that when the body was removed from the scaffold life was extinct.

It is understood that the condemned man left no confession.











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